

Berdache
Lena Austin

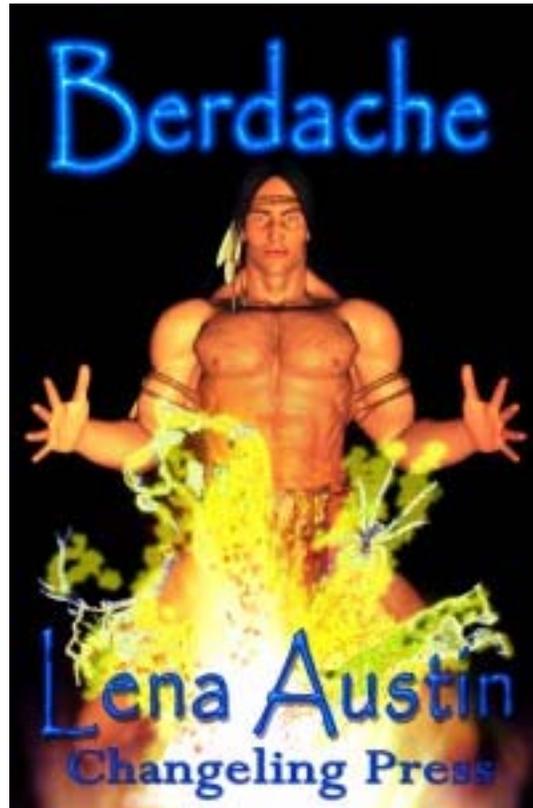
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Chapter One

Lizard purposely left the door flap of his lodge door open when he returned from gathering herbs in the forest. He'd seen the warrior named Black Bear leave the lodge of Red Wolf's wife, Blue Bird, this morning.

Now, Red Wolf's two children played outside their mother's lodge, blissfully unaware of the trouble to come. Their little faces turned occasionally west, looking for their father's return from a three-day hunting trip.

A Berdache knew how to prepare for bad news. Now more than ever, he wished for the words of wisdom from his dead father, the great shaman Kosumi. He threw sticks on his indoor fire until it blazed cheerfully, taking the late winter chill off the air. Then, he placed a few cleansing herbs to sweeten the air for the visitors he knew would come. He didn't have to wait long.

Red Wolf's mother, sister, and the Wise Woman scratched at his doorframe within a few minutes of the sweet smoke rising from his fire.

"I have been expecting you. Please come and sit." His welcome did much to reassure the three nervous women.

Onawa, in her duty as Wise Woman, spoke first. "You have seen then that Blue Bird has taken Black Bear into her lodge?"

"I have seen," Lizard sighed. In his fifteen years of service to the People, it was not the first time a wife had chosen another over her husband.

Macawi echoed the sigh. "I am sorry I forced Red Wolf to marry Blue Bird."

Red Wolf's sister, Kimana, patted Macawi's arm. "You did your duty as a mother." She turned to Lizard. "I disagree with Macawi and Onawa, Berdache. Blue Bird has spoken many times of how she feels neglected and alone, even when Red Wolf is home. He is colder than winter snow to her."

Folding her arms, Onawa looked disapproving. "It is true that Red Wolf is a perfect warrior with a face of stone. But he brings meat for Blue Bird, and provides well for his children."

Lizard held up his hand to stop the impending argument. "The reasons are unimportant. Blue Bird has the right to choose who shares her lodge. If she is unhappy, then no more needs to be said." He faced Macawi. "You came to me because you are concerned for Red Wolf, not Blue Bird."

Macawi's eyes showed her pain for her son. "Red Wolf will be shamed. He will not see that he is a good warrior and a good provider. In all things, he wishes to be perfect, as he has since he was very small. If Blue Bird refuses him admittance to her lodge, then he will look at himself and see flaws that do not exist."

"Hmph!" Kimana folded her arms and lifted her chin. "It will be good for him. He is too perfect. Even I, his sister, see that he is handsome and a perfect warrior. Perhaps it is time he learns to show kindness. A smile would not break his face."

Lizard studied her for a moment. "Then why are you here, asking for my help, Kimana, if you feel he needs this lesson?"

Her eyes softened. "Because he is my brother. Because he will have pain inside his heart. He will hide it behind the pride of the warrior, and it will take more than the comfort of another woman's arms to ease it."

Macawi leaned forward. "You were his childhood friend, Berdache. Though he has left your side for the pursuit of perfection, you still know him better than we."

Lizard nodded thoughtfully. It was true that Red Wolf rarely visited him now, except for the occasional summer fishing expedition. Their duties kept them apart.

Onawa spoke softly. "You are the Berdache. You can see both sides. Perhaps you will take pity on Red Wolf, and in the name of friendship, persuade him to heal and learn from this painful lesson to come." She stood, and settled her shawl about her shoulders. "Perhaps you will explain to Red Wolf why Blue Bird chooses another."

Onawa and Kimana trooped out the door. Macawi remained stubbornly seated, patently wishing a private word. Lizard sighed and made some tea. The bitter brew would help him think. Macawi accepted a cup with a nod of thanks.

"I wish words where no other may hear, Lizard." She smiled when he shot her a surprised look before hiding behind the pretense of sipping his tea. "Yes, I am aware of Red Wolf's name for you. I wish to speak to my son's friend, not the Berdache."

Macawi bent her head. "I have been a proud mother, Lizard. Perhaps too proud. When Red Wolf showed no interest in choosing a wife, or even sporting with the maidens in the captive slaves' lodge, I was afraid. I was selfish, and wanted grandchildren to take care of me when I grew old."

"So, you persuaded Red Wolf to marry Blue Bird." Lizard stated this flatly. "You told him it was his duty and part of being a perfect warrior."

Macawi nodded, and sobbed quietly. "Forgive me, Lizard. I did not want the pride of being a Berdache's mother. I wanted grandchildren more."

He put down his cup hastily before his shaking hands spilled its contents. "You think Red Wolf is a Berdache?" he asked quietly.

Through her shamed tears, Macawi nodded again. "Mostly sure, Lizard. As sure as a mother who is not a Wise Woman can be so. I have discussed this with Onawa. She admits the possibility exists, though only another Berdache can tell. It is so rare to be one who lives in both the world of men and the world of women."

Lizard ran the signs through his mind. He'd been so sure of his dual nature, even at a young age. "Red Wolf dreamed of nothing else but being a warrior, Macawi. He would hide the signs of it from even himself."

Even a Berdache dared not hope. He stared into his tea mug on the ground in front of him. His love for Red Wolf had been buried for many years, as a hopeless thing that could never be. It had never died, and never wavered.

"A lack of interest in women is no promise of being a Berdache, Macawi. If Red Wolf prefers the company of men, then there is no shame in this. You will have to be content with the two grandchildren he has produced, plus any Kimana may have." He

forced a calm smile to his face. "Perhaps Red Wolf will find another warrior to share a lodge with him. Then they may adopt orphans together."

Macawi sobbed. "I will be content. This, I swear. I am only sorry that I tried to make my son into something he is not. I am the cause of his unhappiness to come. I was so afraid when his father died, afraid of being alone. Kimana was so sickly as a child, I feared Red Wolf was my only hope."

Lizard nodded without comment. An illness had passed through the village, and Kimana was one of the few children of that age to survive. But the fevers had left her with a crippled leg and a scarred face. Her chances of marrying were slim. He could understand that Macawi would worry.

He would think on this. Many hours would pass before Red Wolf returned from hunting near the Big Lake.

"I will promise you this, Macawi. I will invite Red Wolf to share my lodge for a short time, until he can build his own lodge. He will not then be forced to share the lodge of the junior warriors and put up with their antics." He folded his arms. "I will look for the signs of the Berdache. If they exist, then I will tell Red Wolf. He must then choose."

Macawi shut her eyes and heaved a sigh. She gathered her shawl and stood. "If he is a Berdache but refuses to accept the training, what will happen?"

It would be better to lie, but Lizard could not. "Then the spirits will drive him mad. It is his choice."

* * *

Red Wolf jogged into the village, holding the huge buck proudly on his shoulders. Its antlers would provide many things Blue Bird had requested, its sinews would help him bind new arrowheads for his small son, and perhaps a little of the hide could be spared to make his daughter a new doll. He had spent the nights away carving a frame for the doll, which now rested in his pack.

He shook his wet hair and decided he could cut a little to give the doll some hair for its head. His bath in the stream had reminded him of the length of it. He was glad he

had washed the stench of travel from his body. Blue Bird had a fastidious nose, and he was hungry.

The village was eerily silent, though the moon was just rising. Only a few old ones sat in front of lodges talking softly. They turned their heads away as he passed by, as if unwilling to greet him.

Finally, his wife's lodge was in view. It pleased him to see Lizard in front of his lodge across the way, sorting beads on a skin in front of a small fire. He began to wonder if all the adults had disappeared, leaving children and old ones alone. Perhaps he would bring the deer's liver to Lizard, and toast it over the fire with him, sharing the delicacy.

"Blue Bird," he called softly, not wishing to wake the children if they slept. He pushed open the door flap, and stuck his head inside.

There, on the pallet, was Blue Bird. Moreover, she wasn't alone. He couldn't see who grunted between her thighs, but it didn't matter.

Blue Bird looked at him with clear eyes, and wrapped her arms around the warrior. She did not need to say more.

He backed hastily out of the lodge, and stood staring at the door flap for a few moments. Inside, he heard Blue Bird's sharp cry of pleasure.

He shouldered the deer more firmly. He was not jealous. He did not care that Blue Bird had chosen another. In fact, he was relieved. He had never wanted to marry Blue Bird, and felt no great loss, except that he would now find it difficult to play with his children when he wasn't living there and bringing them food.

Red Wolf quietly put the deer down, and rummaged in his pack for the frame of the doll he had made. He laid it carefully at the side of the door flap for his daughter to find in the morning. Though only seven summers old, she would know what to do with it. His chest hurt for a moment, but he kept his face hidden until the pain passed and his eyes stopped watering.

Another unseemly emotion surfaced as he picked up the deer, and he struggled to keep his face serene. Anger. Unreasoning anger. No, embarrassment. Somehow, he

had failed to keep Blue Bird happy and comfortable. It was her right to refuse him admittance and take another man if she was unhappy, he reminded himself.

Another sharp cry from inside, followed by a deep-throated groan, told him much. He had never pleased Blue Bird to where she cried out so often like that.

Grateful for the darkness, which hid the heat that came to his face, he settled the deer more comfortably on his shoulder. Turning, he saw Lizard still sorting his beads.

Lizard would welcome the deer. Red Wolf's belly rumbled, reminding him that he'd eaten nothing since the sun rose. Silently, Red Wolf strode across to Lizard's lodge.

Lizard looked up and smiled at Red Wolf. "Good hunting, Red Wolf. That is a large buck."

His voice icy, Red Wolf answered, "Blue Bird has no need of it. I offer it to you."

Nodding, Lizard gestured to the frame beside his lodge for the hanging and gutting of animals. "Many thanks. However, it is too large for me alone. I will cook some now, and share the rest with those whose hunting has not been so fortunate. Will you help me eat it?"

A loud rumble from Red Wolf's belly answered for him. "I will be pleased to do so. I will return in an hour." He put the deer on the frame and strode away, with his back straight and proud, toward the lodge of the captive women. He had something to prove to himself, first.

Chapter Two

Lizard shut his eyes in pain as Red Wolf stalked toward the lodge of the captive slaves. Not only did he suffer with his dearest friend for his humiliation, but Lizard's own longing for Red Wolf threatened to choke the breath from his body. He wanted with all his heart to run after Red Wolf, and offer his own arms for comfort.

Shaking his head at his foolishness, Lizard went to the rack to prepare a meal for Red Wolf. The deer was already bled out, and the liver carefully protected in a leather wrapping. The meat would not spoil in the cool night air, and in the morning Lizard would strip it of all useable parts.

One of the village dogs trotted over, and sat to patiently wait for any scraps Lizard might give him. This scruffy little fellow often accompanied the Berdache on herb hunts, and would chase a thrown stick to amuse his man-friend. Lizard tossed him a few pieces as he removed a large haunch for roasting. He had named the dog Grub, because it was the same white color as the insect grubs in trees.

"So, Grub. You're hungry tonight. I wonder if you'll choose to sleep in my lodge, since the night air is so cold." The little dog wagged his tail, and did a small dance to beg for more. His reward was a larger scrap than usual for the trick.

Lizard carried the roast to his cooking rock and stuffed wild garlic into slits he cut into the meat before spitting it on the fire. Grub looked hopefully at the roast on the spit, but didn't attempt to steal what was not his.

"If you guard it instead of taking it, I will give you all the entrails you wish to eat tomorrow." Lizard rubbed the dog's ears, and sensed his agreement to the bargain.

The pressure inside Lizard's groin was too much. He decided he must ease the ache before Red Wolf returned. All knew Lizard preferred the company of men on his

sleeping mat, but there were none in the village beside himself who felt the same. He squirmed, shifting on his buttocks.

Only the trader Turkey Feathers understood Lizard's needs, and was willing to gain mutual satisfaction when he visited on an irregular basis. Turkey Feathers would not be seen until the Mother warmed her cloak of earth again, and the birds returned to their nests. Until then, Lizard must seek his own relief.

"I will not be long," he promised Grub with another scratch behind the ears. Grub lay down near the fire to wait, but he watched Lizard with large sad eyes as he got up and went into his lodge.

The prospect of having Red Wolf in his lodge was driving Lizard insane with lust. It brought visions of Red Wolf, tall and hard-muscled, giving Lizard the opportunity to kneel before him and give him pleasure.

Lizard drew his hardened cock from his loincloth, and sat on the mat. He let the vision clear, seeing Red Wolf standing before him, naked and willing. It did not matter that Red Wolf rarely smiled. Lizard did not demand a showing of teeth, only that Red Wolf enjoy what was done.

He saw himself kneel before Red Wolf's distended member, and kiss it, taking delight in Red Wolf's hissing intake of breath. Lizard's hand stroked his own swollen cock, even as he lovingly took Red Wolf's into his mouth. He would suck on it, scraping with his teeth, listening with pleasure to Red Wolf's quiet moans.

Lizard's hand dipped in a small pot of rendered bear grease he kept not far from his sleeping mat for this purpose. A small amount allowed him to pull and tug, until he slipped deeper into his fantasy.

He felt Red Wolf's hand on the back of his head, holding him steadily while he sucked and played with the twitching flesh and lovingly fondled his *dowsetts* until they rose away from his hand. Red Wolf put his hand on Lizard's hair.

"Stop. I wish to put you on your back," Red Wolf whispered.

Complying with his vision's request, Lizard lay down on his back. His breath came quickly, and his hand moved faster. His need made his whole body quiver and buck.

He placed his heels on Red Wolf's shoulders, prepared to beg if necessary, for release. He saw Red Wolf use the bear grease, and closed his eyes with pleasure, knowing release would come quickly.

His ass puckered, craving entry.

"Give me your *chodis*, Red Wolf. I wish to feel it buried deep within me," he muttered.

Red Wolf, his eyes shining, was in the mood to comply. He entered as gently as Lizard would wish. Of course, it was his fantasy, was it not? Lizard laughed at himself and imagined every thrust and upstroke, while his hand busied itself performing the only service he'd had in many moons.

His berries moved, signifying the ultimate of pleasure, and he welcomed the release it would bring. He envisioned Red Wolf's hand moving to help him, covering his own, lovingly stroking. "I love you," Lizard whispered.

With his free hand, Lizard covered himself with a rabbit fur and allowed the ecstasy to take him. It was almost as good as a spirit journey, though there was little to compare the two. Despair and futility warred with pleasure and hope.

As he remained on the mat and recovered, his mind refused to quiet. It dared to ask, "*What if Red Wolf is indeed another Berdache?*" It was unlikely. The spirits, which often played tricks upon men, did not often give such rare things to the People. However, if the Choctaw had somehow been favored, there was little time to waste. An untrained Berdache often went mad.

Lizard removed the rabbit fur and sat up to throw the fur into a corner where he kept things in need of washing. Outside the doorway, Grub looked at him with his wise, sad eyes, and Lizard went out to turn the venison, adjusting his loincloth to a more comfortable position.

He sat next to Grub, who shifted to lay his head on Lizard's thigh. Lizard responded to this show of affection with rubs and scratches.

"You have never been so friendly, Grub. Do you recognize my sadness and despair? You bring me comfort, and I am grateful for it." Lizard sighed. "I am a fool, my friend. I love one who can never love me, for I think the women see falsely. Red Wolf has never been uncomfortable around women, and sported often with the maidens before he married. He gave two good children to Blue Bird."

Grub whined and looked out into the darkness. Lizard turned his gaze to behold Red Wolf in the distance, emerging from the female slaves' lodge with one of the captives tugging him out into the night. Red Wolf seemed to go willingly, even eagerly. As long as the maiden was in the company of a warrior, the keeper would not care, knowing the girl could not escape a full warrior of Red Wolf's strength.

"You see, Grub? He goes to find comfort in the arms of a woman. Even a slave woman is better than me to warm his mat. I long for him until I fear my chest would burst, yet I cannot speak for fear of driving him away."

Unmanly tears welled up in Lizard's eyes, and he wiped them away unashamedly. "It is enough that he comes to me for friendship and the occasional fishing, and brings a small share of his hunting when there is too much for... for his family. Perhaps now that he shares my lodge, there might be more opportunities for companionship. I will take what scraps he throws me of friendly affection." Lizard put his head in his hands for a moment. "I must, for that is all I will get." He would be grateful for companionship, if not understanding. He was the only Berdache for many days' journey.

Grub jumped up into Lizard's lap and began to lick his hands, whining softly, until Lizard showed his face. Bathed in the dog's wet tongue, Lizard soon chuckled.

"Are you saying I have your love?"

More licks on his chin. Perhaps Grub was indeed trying to speak to him, and he was grateful. It may be that, with time, Grub would choose to stay.

"And the love of the animal spirits?"

Grub hopped down and began to prance about, panting. He occasionally looked off in the direction Red Wolf and the slave maiden had gone, only to return to his cheerful antics.

“It is true. I have my duties, and I thank you for the reminder. I see you still look for Red Wolf. Yes, I promise I will watch for the signs of the Berdache in him. First, I must entice him to stay for a few days. He will want to return to his hunting and solitude. He will bury his hurt deeply, if it is not expressed.”

Grub returned to lie beside Lizard, and they contentedly cooked the meat together and watched the moon rise.

* * *

Red Wolf’s entrance into the lodge of the slave maidens was abrupt, and without requesting permission to enter. This was the one place where females lived, that they did not own. Their keeper arose from her place near the fire to greet him, while the slave maidens knelt to await his choosing. Unlike so many other slave lodges, these females were well treated and paid for the pleasures of their bodies. Their keeper saw to it no harm befell them, so the maidens were as content as captives could be.

The keeper waited while Red Wolf dug out a small cake of salt from his pouch. This was a fair trade, fresh from the deer lick an hour away. She nodded, and stepped back, allowing him to examine the slaves.

Most kept their gaze on the floor, but one maiden eyed him with cool interest. She was Chickasaw, by her clothing decorations. She might speak the trade tongue, unlike the dark-skinned Cherokee or the long-boned Iroquois girls. He wanted one who would understand his orders. He pointed at the Chickasaw, and she rose to her feet to lead him meekly to her sleeping mat.

It pleased him to note that each girl had been given a modicum of privacy with hangings from the ceiling of the lodge as well as stacked belongings on the floor. Each girl was permitted to weave baskets and cloth, or pursue reasonable talents like the making of clay pots. Their efforts had been used wisely, and he nodded his approval.

“Do you speak the trade tongue, Chickasaw woman?” he asked.

"I do, Warrior. I have been here two summers." She knelt on the mat, but boldly kept her eyes on his. She would not speak his name without permission, even if she knew it well. The village was small.

This woman was brave, and he admired that. "You speak the trade tongue very well, and you have courage. What is your name?"

She smiled briefly, showing two dimples in her cheeks. "Born in Moonlight, Warrior." She shrugged. "Many simply call me Moon." She put her head down, for the first time acting like the cowed slave maiden she was.

"Then I shall do so, if it does not displease you." Pity for a slave's lot made him gentle his voice slightly. He would hate to be a captive, never knowing freedom unless another willed it so.

Again, she shrugged. "It is not displeasing. I am here for you to command, Warrior. You have never visited me before. What would you have me do?" Her little tongue flicked out to lick her lips, betraying her personal preference.

Red Wolf moved aside his loincloth, his *chodis* flaccid and uninterested. He wondered at it for a moment. Had Blue Bird's rejection unmanned him totally?

Moon needed no further orders. She moved forward on her knees, and took him into her mouth.

She was very good, he decided. She licked with her small tongue and sucked willingly with her soft mouth. While it was pleasant, and he willed his body to agree and present her with a proper stalk to work upon, his *chodis* remained limp and listless.

Moon worked as hard as she could, playing with his sack and berries, and sucking enthusiastically, but nothing worked. She finally sat back with a sigh of regret. "I am sorry, Warrior. I am unable to make you rise. What am I doing that is displeasing?" Her whisper would not carry beyond the hangings.

He folded his arms and stared at a weaving on her wall, his face flaming in humiliation. "I do not know. You know well how to please. I should be hard as stone." His embarrassment ate at him, and he wanted to run deep into the woods, never to return.

“Warrior, what has happened to bring you here? Is your heart sick that you wish to ease it in lustful play?” Her voice was earnest and kind.

Red Wolf looked down at the maiden. Moon kept her hands on her thighs, but looked up at his face and read something there. She rose to her feet, and placed a soft hand on his arm. “Will you take me for a walk, Warrior, far from prying eyes and ears? Perhaps we may speak of this, and I will be able to give you pleasure in privacy.”

Red Wolf permitted her to tug him outside the door, telling himself it was a kindness to take a slave maiden out of the lodge and permit her fresh air. She would not run away from a warrior.

Moon might be right. There was no dishonor in speaking to a slave maiden about his feelings. Perhaps she might tell him what he had done so wrong with Blue Bird. Sex and matters of the heart were better kept firmly apart from one another.

Chapter Three

Red Wolf allowed Moon to lead him into the field where corn, beans, and squash would grow soon, after the First New Moon of Spring Ceremony. Now, however, grasses and tall weeds obscured them from sight when they sat on the rich fragrant earth.

“Tell me, Warrior, what troubles you,” Moon begged.

In short, simple sentences, Red Wolf told her. “My wife has chosen another to take into her lodge. I don’t know what I did or did not do.”

Moon sat facing him, and the moonlight shone in her eyes. “You do not seem angry.”

He shrugged. “I am not. I am... relieved. I will miss my children, but it is a small village. There will be time to see them and make sure they are happy.”

“But you will not miss your wife?”

“No.” He stared off in the darkness. There was no harm in being honest. “I will miss her cooking.” In fact, he could smell roasting venison. His stomach rumbled audibly.

Her smile was somewhat pained. “That is all you will miss? Not her warm body in the mat next to you? Not her sexual favors?”

There was little he could say without being insulting, but again, he felt compelled to be honest. “I could roll up in my furs and be as warm. There is little pleasure in the sex. I have more fun dancing in the ceremonies.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Do you know why you got so little joy out of her? Was it because she lay there like a dead fish? Did she smell like one?”

Uncannily, the wind shifted, and even rushed like the sound of the sea. That sound brought memories of expeditions to go hunting for shellfish, and the foul scent of decaying fish on the shore.

Red Wolf choked back a laugh. "No. She was clean and tried to interest me more often than I wished." He shuddered, remembering the times she had placed his hands on her breasts, or cupped his sex in her little hands.

Then, without warning, understanding hit him with the force of a war club. "I did not like the fact that she was little and soft. It feels..." He paused and searched for an analogy. "I fear I will insult you, Moon. I feel as if I am handling the brains of a deer. It is... unpleasant."

Instead of becoming angry, Moon's voice took on a hint of amusement. She settled herself more comfortably in the soft earth. "Would you prefer something firmer? Perhaps even tighter? Something you did not fear to break?"

The vision of Imala, the female warrior, floated before his face. Imala was firmer, and stronger. "Yes, but not even Imala appeals to me. She is also smaller."

Moon patted his arm. "Warrior, I fear no woman would please you. Even the strongest and largest would not suit you, I think." She sighed. "I fear you will beat me for saying so, but perhaps you should consider men." She cringed away, slightly, but her eyes remained steady. Her chin jutted out, daring him to strike her for her opinion.

Denial raged in him like an uncontrolled grassfire. To prefer men was to be less than the perfect warrior, something his heart craved. His clan was small, so few in number that he and his son were the last males born to the clan. "I must bring honor to the Wolf clan. My son and I are the last."

Moon tossed her head, and he heard the beads in her hair clicking rhythmically. "There is no dishonor in liking men. What has sex to do with the way a man fights and dies? The two are not the same, save that a man who has been in battle often wishes sexual favors soon after." She paused, and then her smile turned sly and knowing. "Your children were bred after battles were fought and won, were they not?"

He jerked in surprise. "Yes. Yes, they were. After the celebratory feasts. We danced and..." He smiled in remembrance of the pride and feeling of euphoria. It had been easy for Blue Bird to entice him to the mat those nights. "How did you know?"

"We slaves are often needed to keep all the warriors happy after a battle." She stood, and brushed off her leggings. "I will be waiting for you after the next battle, Red... er, Warrior."

He grinned at her accidental use of his name. "You may call me by my name. The next time I face death's journey to the West, I will remember you will be there." He rubbed a scar on his arm that still ached upon occasion, a reminder of a near brush with death.

"Good. You should take me back now, or the keeper will worry."

He rose and took her arm to help her over the mounds. "You seem content with being a slave, Moon. Is it not hard?"

As they passed a small fire where villagers played a late game of chance, he saw her cheerful face. "I like sex," she replied simply.

He returned her to the lodge. The keeper wore an anxious look until she saw Moon's smiling face. Moon turned and faced Red Wolf. She put her hands over her face and bowed her head, signifying for all to see her obeisance to Red Wolf.

"I am grateful for the honor of your kindness and favors, Warrior," she said softly. The twinkle in her eye told him she would do much to restore his honor, and tell tales of his prowess.

In gratitude, he snatched her up by her arms and kissed her long and well, plundering her mouth. She melted in his grasp, and gave back all that he did. When he released her and set her back down, she staggered as if she'd been drinking fermented grape juice. "And you pleased me well tonight, Moon. I will visit you again."

He turned and sauntered out the door, his head held high. A favor for a favor. He'd just increased her price among the slaves. The excited babble of females all demanding to know every detail followed him into the night.

* * *

Lizard looked up as Grub gave a little bark and ran to greet Red Wolf. The Berdache's jaw fell open to see Red Wolf grinning, and his eyes twinkling merrily.

"Close your mouth, Lizard. You look like one of the fish we catch." Red Wolf sat down on his haunches and speared a piece of roasted venison. "This smell would call many wolves to the fire, not just me."

Red Wolf's admonishment was said with such friendly affection that Lizard was astonished. He watched Red Wolf chew with relish. "The maiden must have pleased you greatly," he commented, his heart sinking.

The women were wrong, Lizard decided. Red Wolf did enjoy the pleasures of feminine flesh if a slave, wearily performing for just another warrior, could bring such a smile to Red Wolf's face of stone. He bowed his head and schooled his expression to polite interest.

Miming stabbing at Lizard with his knife, the handsome warrior laughed. "You see too much, Berdache. Yes, she pleased me. I may ask for her again. She is skilled." He did not bother to speak softly.

Lizard's lips twitched as he saw some heads turn from nearby lodges, where some villagers sat, enjoying a last pipe of tobacco or a game of chance. Here was an opportunity to punish Blue Bird for her crime of telling the whole village how little Red Wolf sought the pleasures of her body, destroying his honor. "Really, now? I do not indulge in sporting with maidens, but I am willing to hear all. Which one pleased you so much that you smile?"

His eyes merry, Red Wolf regained some of the dignity of a warrior, but his voice betrayed happiness. "The Chickasaw woman, Born in Moonlight. Not only does she speak the trade tongue, but her mouth is as skilled as the rest of her body." His volume raised just a notch. "She finds joy in pleasuring a warrior well."

That was one great wound to Blue Bird. The implication was that Blue Bird could not please a warrior. That was the reason for Red Wolf's indifference to her. Lizard twitched, wanting to whoop and laugh at the trick they played on Blue Bird. Rumor would fly that Red Wolf had found comfort easily in the arms of another woman, and

so eyes would turn to Blue Bird as the true cause of the marriage's failure, despite her words to the contrary. She had used rumor to hurt Red Wolf, and this was a fitting return.

Such a manipulation of rumor was worthy of a Berdache's skills, and Lizard delighted in it. While few would think to ask the slave, those who heard this night's conversation would do the work of repairing Red Wolf's reputation for him. At the same time, the whole village would be reminded that a marriage failed because of two people, not one.

Lizard shared the meal, determined to give nothing more than friendship to Red Wolf and share in the restoration of his honor. "I thank you for the gift of the deer, Red Wolf. Are there any parts you wish for your own use?"

"Yes. I wish some of the sinew, and a bit of the hide. My son will need new arrows, and I will give my daughter the hide for a new doll. The rest is yours, if you wish it." By stating such, Red Wolf reminded the villagers listening that he still provided for his children, and claimed them. He would not relinquish his parental rights or duties.

"That is fair and right. I will tan the hide for your daughter with my portion."

Red Wolf nodded. "Agreed." He gave a piece of meat to Grub, who now sat between them, begging for scraps. "Have you named our white friend, here?"

"Grub. He often companions me when I hunt for sacred woods and herbs to heal the sick."

"Then he will be fed as is proper for one who guards the sacred Berdache." Red Wolf's voice now teased Lizard. The warrior dodged a small piece of gristle thrown at him, which Grub was happy to clean up.

The meal was dispatched, and the fire banked. It was now late, and the main gathering place deserted. Even the old ones who often gossiped late into the night had gone to their sleeping mats. Like an old couple who knew each other's ways, they wordlessly cleaned up, and retired for the night into the lodge.

Lizard followed Red Wolf inside, where the warrior went to work putting his furs from his hunting pack on the spare sleeping shelf Lizard kept for the very ill. Grub curled up comfortably on the pile of dirty clothing in the corner.

After Lizard secured the door flap, he heard Red Wolf say softly, "Come here, Lizard. I ask my friend, not the Berdache."

Red Wolf now sat in front of the indoor fire, and he seemed uncomfortable. Lizard went and sat next to him. "What is it, my oldest friend?"

"I would ask something I do not wish others to hear," Red Wolf began, and then faltered.

Lizard waited politely, with growing curiosity. When no question came immediately, Lizard laid his hand lightly on Red Wolf's arm. "I will swear to silence, if you wish it."

Drawing one long, shaking breath, Red Wolf asked, "What is it like to love a man?"

So stunned was Lizard that his thoughts would not come. All he could do was listen to his heartbeat in his chest. As always, Red Wolf had managed to confuse and disorient him. Not many could.

Blinking, Lizard gathered his thoughts. "That is the one question I never expected of you, old friend." He stared into the glowing embers of the fire for a few moments. "Have patience. No one has ever asked before, so I have no ready answers."

"I can wait for the words." Red Wolf's eyes remained steady, but his body betrayed tension.

Was it fear? Red Wolf was the strongest and bravest of the warriors, and had the scars to prove it. Yet, their friendship demanded truth above all things, even when the oratory skills of the Berdache fled from Lizard's memory.

"Men are large and strong. Men have firm skin and smell better, to me." Lizard shrugged. "It is hard to explain." He folded his arms and looked at the floor, taking a deep breath. "I have served the needs of women in my position of Berdache, when it is

needed. Always, there is the need for restraint. With a man, you can release the beast within, for every man has the inner beast."

"The beast within? Like a connection with the animal spirits?" The puzzled and agitated tone in Red Wolf's voice must have alerted Grub. The dog perked up his ears. He joined the men, sitting between them.

Lizard reached out to scratch Grub's ears and reassure him that there was no trouble. "Yes, there is some of that, for we are all brothers, as the Maker intended us to be. But in the spirits of men there is the savagery of battle. No matter how we try to contain it."

Red Wolf nodded. "I know that rage well."

Lizard reached for his pipe. This topic left him fumbling for words. "With a man to share pleasure, one may be unrestrained. With a woman, some of the fierceness must be put aside so we do not frighten or hurt them with our savagery." He lit it with a burning stick from the fire, the smell of tobacco soothing his agitation.

"But they beg for the beast in us."

"They beg for what they fear." He held up a hand to stop Red Wolf's automatic protest. "Many times, women wish to prove themselves equal to the warrior. This is unnecessary. We know there are only differences in strength. You and I could not bear the pain of childbirth. We could not bleed once a moon and live. That is a magic we do not have. But most of them would go mad if they were to be in battle." He offered the pipe to Red Wolf.

Red Wolf chuckled, took it and puffed contentedly. "Imala would disagree."

"There are exceptions, always. Women born with men's spirits, and men born with women's spirits. Then, you have the ones like me. The true misfits." A lifetime of pain colored that simple statement.

His dearest friend reacted with horror and indignation. "You are honored above all. Your words are taken for complete truth. Ask, and it is yours. They call upon you to stop wars and settle disputes, and your words are heeded." He used the pipe to emphasize every point until the burning tobacco within threatened to spill out.

Lizard shook his head and took the pipe back. "I can walk in both worlds, but I am not of either one. I am alone most of the time."

Grub barked at Lizard's sad tone. The sharp sound acted like a warning to the Berdache, and he lifted his chin. "Grub reminds me I have not answered your question. The only way to understand is to experience it." Lizard summoned all his courage. "Why? Do you wish this?" He offered his pipe.

Red Wolf's hands shook as he lifted the pipe to his lips, but he did not draw from it. "Yes. No." He looked at the floor. "I am not sure."

They sat in silence, passing the pipe back and forth. Lizard suspected he knew why Red Wolf was reluctant. Many assumed there was pain involved in men giving men pleasure. He took the pipe from Red Wolf and drew on it thoughtfully.

"Perhaps, just let me hold you. That is a difference that causes no harm, to be the one held instead of holding. Could you bear this?" he offered.

Red Wolf shrugged, retreating into a warrior's silence. Lizard put aside the pipe and lay down upon his sleeping mat, his arms open. After staring for a few moments with indecision flickering across his face, Red Wolf joined him.

Lizard chuckled. "You are as stiff as a log. Relax. I will not do anything more than hold you. This I swear." He kept his secret elation that he got this tiny morsel of affection strictly to himself. He held himself rigidly under control, and did not do more than wrap his arms around Red Wolf's long, firm body.

Red Wolf became less stiff, but did not fully relax. "This is not so bad. Different, but not bad. You are stiff too. I know why I am uncomfortable. But why are you?"

"I will speak the truth and say I have longed to do this, and more, with you. Don't stiffen up. Until the day you ask, I will not do more than hold you."

They lay together, in the dark. Finally, Red Wolf turned, and rested his head on Lizard's shoulder. He yawned, and said, "Someday, I may let you." His arm crept across until it draped on Lizard's belly. Then he was asleep.

If anything could ensure Lizard a sleepless night, it was that simple statement, he thought. But as soon as he breathed in the scent of Red Wolf's hair, sleep stole his discomfort away.

Chapter Four

“Red Wolf!”

The call came with echoes, like talking in a cave. Red Wolf opened his eyes and slid away from Lizard’s sleeping body without disturbing him.

The light outside was bright as a summer day. The figure framed in the open doorway of the lodge had the shape of a man wearing a shaman’s full regalia, even down to the heavy feathered cloak Lizard sometimes wore.

Red Wolf rose to his feet, feeling trust and calm for the stranger. The figure motioned silently for him to step outside, and, loathe to disturb Lizard, Red Wolf obeyed.

He gasped aloud when he saw who the visitor was. “Kosumi!” He shuddered a moment. “But, you crossed to the summerland two winters ago. I saw the bone pickers remove your...” He faltered and choked. “Forgive me.”

Kosumi smiled and laughed. “Yes, Red Wolf, this is a spirit journey. My son may not accompany you this time. I will be with you. Come.”

The spirit-shaman turned and led Red Wolf through the lush grasses of summer. The rest of the village was nowhere to be seen, only a verdant meadow surrounded by forest.

Though he burned with curiosity, Red Wolf clamped down firmly on the wish to ask many questions. The spirit world was full of all manner of things that might take exception to his insolence, even Kosumi himself.

They walked through the forest, and Red Wolf was exceedingly careful where he stepped. Even the grass beneath his feet had a living spirit here, and stepping on one blade would cause harm. He shuddered what to think would happen if he hurt a creature. But he saw none, not even an insect.

Kosumi stopped and turned. "Now that we are out of the hearing of my son's sleeping spirit, I will tell you a few things. We are in the place between worlds, where few of the nature spirits venture. Look there." He pointed to an opening in the earth, at the foot of a great mountain that was in the distance. "There, you may not go, unless you are accompanied by either a shaman or a spirit-creature. Someday, you may go and learn more. Today is not that day."

Red Wolf was a brave man, but even he was humbled. "I am only a warrior. I visited this place and spoke with the animal spirits that wished to accompany me on my life journey. Why am I here? A warrior visits this place but once."

The spirit shook his head. "You are a warrior now. However, the spirits wish you to see a thing. Come. It is not far." He faced a new direction, away from the mountain, and walked briskly.

What seemed a few moments passed, and Red Wolf heard the sound of the sea as well as a hissing. The air became hot, so hot that thick fog lay like a blanket between the trees. Even the ground became warmer, and it was more difficult to breathe.

Kosumi led Red Wolf to the edge of a bluff, where they could look down in safety upon the chaotic scene below.

Below, the sea rushed onto the shore, but it was land Red Wolf had never seen. The earth glowed like the embers of a fire, part dark rock, and part red-hot liquid. Where it touched the cool sea, steam arose in amounts such as were never seen in a woman's cooking pot. Where the water touched the earth, new land formed, and the sea swallowed some.

On a small mass of land, right in the middle of all the violence, stood Lizard. What he fought against could not be seen, but his arms were raised and he chanted to both the land and the sea.

The spirit shaman grabbed Red Wolf's arm in an iron grip as Red Wolf gasped and shouted in fear. Red Wolf struggled in Kosumi's implacable grip, but the spirit shaman held tightly. "You cannot help, Red Wolf. Not yet."

Even as they watched, the waters calmed and the earth ceased its relentless march to the sea. Each moved at a slower, friendlier pace. The waves became gentle, and the earth did not burn nearby plants as it met the sea.

Lizard lowered his arms wearily, but did not leave his tiny island of land. His head bowed, he sank down to sit and rest, but remained watchful.

"He waits for the next time he is needed." Kosumi answered Red Wolf's unspoken question. "You would arouse the spirits of the water and earth again if you went to him now. Do you understand this?"

The warrior looked down at the Berdache. "I am seeing a creation of the spirits to explain what Lizard does and how he walks between the worlds."

"Yes."

Red Wolf bowed his head. "I am shamed. All my life I assumed that the warrior and the shaman were two different things. Now I see that Lizard fights battles I do not see, against foes I do not understand." He studied the still figure below. "He is wounded and scarred. He bleeds."

Now that Red Wolf looked without fear, the Berdache's wounds were many. The feet of the figure below bled from the sharp rocks of his small refuge. His face was scarred and one eye blackened. The worst wound was the one in his chest. Lizard bled constantly from a large, gaping hole that would have killed a mortal warrior. It seeped drops of blood steadily, which fell on the land beneath him to run into the sea.

"My son has fought alone for years. Just as with a warrior, one does not see battle without acquiring a few scars." Kosumi's voice held a large portion of pride, as well as sadness.

"Why does his heart bleed? Can't I help him?" Red Wolf begged.

"His heart bleeds for you, Red Wolf. If you wish to help him, you merely must decide to do so." Kosumi released his grip on Red Wolf's arm.

"I wish to help him! That is all I know."

"It is enough. You may go to him now." Kosumi stepped back a pace.

Those words were all the permission Red Wolf needed. He pelted down the bluff, uncaring that the hot earth burned his feet, but grateful when they touched the cooling water. Somehow, without his understanding why, the water did not accept him into itself, but permitted him to run on its surface until he reached the small island.

The splashing he made aroused Lizard from his watchful stupor. He raised his head and when he saw Red Wolf, the joy in his eyes lit the air with golden light. Blue Bird had never looked on him with such happiness, merely grateful to see him. Lizard called out in joy and concern, "Red Wolf!"

The sharp rocks of the island cut Red Wolf's feet, but his focus was on Lizard's gaping chest wound. He placed his hand over the injury, hoping in some way to stop the bleeding. Even as his palm touched Lizard's chest, the wound closed.

And the world vanished.

* * *

Lizard awoke to the sound of Red Wolf's moans beside him. The warrior had kicked off the sleeping fur that Lizard had put over both of them. His feet moved as if he ran somewhere, and his breathing was labored.

Fearing that, in the dream, Red Wolf would harm himself, Lizard called softly, "Red Wolf."

Red Wolf kicked a little more, and Lizard sat up. Whatever troubled Red Wolf was powerful.

Before Lizard could make a decision, Red Wolf's eyes flew open, and he, too, sat up. His eyes were still hazy with the dream, and he reached out to touch Lizard's bare chest with concern. "It does not bleed now," he cried out in wonder and confusion.

Lizard put his hand over Red Wolf's. "No, Red Wolf. All is well."

"No, it is not." Red Wolf's eyes were no longer glazed with the strength of the dream, yet the fierceness remained on his face.

With the swiftness of a badger, Red Wolf's hands clamped down on Lizard's arms. The dream-crazed warrior yanked the Berdache to his chest with total disregard

for dignity. All Lizard managed was a gasp of surprise before Red Wolf's lips clamped down on his.

Lizard's mouth was open from his gasp, and Red Wolf forced it open further with his tongue. The violent kiss, full of an unspoken need, aroused in Lizard a burning heat. Tongues tangled and fought, each vying for supremacy. Some force in Lizard demanded he not submit, until he was sure it was truly a choice on Red Wolf's part, and not the dream that made him act thus.

With a moan, Red Wolf broke the kiss. "You with your maiden's hair and shaman's skills. You call to me like no other. I don't understand you or the battles you fight, but I know now that you make war with an unseen enemy. It is enough."

Shock made Lizard's eyes fly open wide. No one had ever explained what he did so simply. "Your dream showed you this?"

Red Wolf's hands roamed Lizard's chest, and even brushed a nipple that hardened in response. "Yes, and after I am done exploring what makes you call to me, I will tell you of it." He grinned, looking remarkably like his namesake. "I will see for myself what the differences are."

A hand calloused from holding bow and club tweaked Lizard's nipple none too gently, radiating pain and pleasure through Lizard's body. It was difficult to think, to remain a proud Berdache, when he wanted to lay back and give his body for study. But his chin jerked up. "Shouldn't you ask? I am no slave maiden to humbly submit to your desires without having wishes of my own."

The grin grew sly and Red Wolf's eyes challenged. "Oh, Lizard? And what is it you wish? We can trade, perhaps." His hand moved to brush and play with Lizard's other nipple. "I seem to remember you telling me you wanted this earlier."

"I do. I will show you what it feels like, while you make your decisions. You will abandon your warrior's silence and tell me what it feels like, or, if you cannot manage speech, simply that you like or dislike what I do." Lizard's own hand crept up to mirror all that Red Wolf did.

Red Wolf's eyes slowly became half-lidded. When he gently tweaked one of Lizard's nipples, the same was done to him. "Agreed. It is a bargain."

"Good. We will stop haggling like sharp old women bargaining with the trader." Lizard bent forward and licked the same nipple he'd pinched a moment before. "How does that feel?"

Drawing a shaky breath, Red Wolf seemed to savor the sensation. He swallowed. "Good. Very good. It is now my turn to taste."

He bent and suckled at Lizard's right nipple. Lizard felt himself harden, and begged the beast within for caution. Yet, when he glanced down after Red Wolf withdrew, he saw that he was not the only one whose *chodis* rose.

He would not ask for all that could be done in pleasuring one another. He would only give what Red Wolf would take, and no more. "I want to do more, Red Wolf. Things you may not wish to do in return. You will decide." He bent forward to lick and nibble at the firm pectoral muscle, and felt it quiver in response.

"Yesss," Red Wolf hissed. "I will." He swayed, and his eyes shut.

"Let me know when you wish me to stop." Lizard pushed with his head until Red Wolf lay back on the mat.

"I will selfishly allow you all you wish, for now," Red Wolf moaned. "What you do makes me harder than stone."

Lizard moved down his friend's body until his cheek rested comfortably on Red Wolf's thigh, relishing every muscle and the salt-sweet taste of his skin. His humming agreement made Red Wolf throw back his head and gasp for air.

The loincloth Red Wolf wore was no hindrance to his questing hands and tongue. The scent of pure male filled his nose, and Lizard drank in the heady richness. How much more would Red Wolf allow, he didn't know, but Lizard would take all he could get.

The first delicious lap from the glistening tip of Red Wolf's *chodis* was as sweet as honey to Lizard's tongue. He restrained himself from sucking it all in and gobbling greedily. This was for Red Wolf's pleasure, not his own.

He was therefore shocked into stillness when he felt Red Wolf's tentative fingers move aside his own loincloth and grasp Lizard's swollen and aching *chodis*.

"Like this?" Red Wolf whispered, and licked with a tentative tongue.

"Spirits, yes," Lizard moaned.

"Good. Tastes good. Show me more." Red Wolf licked again.

They lay side by side with one knee bent, facing one another's *chodis*, and Red Wolf mirrored everything Lizard did. Perhaps he did it with less skill, but the effect was the same as if he were a practiced Berdache of many years.

Lizard took Red Wolf's stalk into his mouth and sucked gently. Red Wolf did the same, and managed it well. While still continuing to swallow all of Red Wolf he could, Lizard played with Red Wolf's berries and found himself played with in return.

But when Lizard slid a tentative finger down to caress just below the sack of berries, Red Wolf stiffened. At first, Lizard was concerned he had gone too far and asked for too much, until Red Wolf groaned, and let go of Lizard's hardness to speak. "Lizard, I will release if you continue on that path."

Lizard removed his mouth but kept his lips on the tip, now full of delicious liquid to drink. "Good. I want this."

"I... I cannot drink your pleasure." Red Wolf gasped as Lizard licked away the cream on his *chodis*.

"You have done enough, my friend. Rest and let me pleasure you," Lizard replied gently. He would ache with need for release, but that was a small price to pay for this joyful night.

"No. I will do what I can. I am a warrior. I have my honor." Red Wolf's hand grasped Lizard with firmness, and began to pump.

It hurt and felt wonderful, all at once. There would be time later to instruct Red Wolf in the uses of bear grease. Lizard returned to his work on Red Wolf, and enjoyed what Red Wolf's hand could do. Lizard slipped his finger back to caress below the berries, and felt the whole sack move away from his hand. Yes, Red Wolf liked that. He dared more, and slowly moved his finger to tease the anal opening.

Red Wolf's hand faltered for a moment, and then he threw back his head to pant to the Sky Father. He was still for a mere moment, and then his pleasure erupted from deep within. Lizard did his best to swallow it all, but was distracted by Red Wolf's hand, now tighter and stronger, as it returned to its work to bring him similar joy.

Lizard's own liquid flowed, easing the burning pain, and now he keened and used Red Wolf's *chodis* to silence his cries of joy. So strong was Lizard's pleasure that some drops fell into the embers of the fire with tiny hisses.

Both men rolled onto their backs, striving for breath. Many minutes passed before Red Wolf chuckled. "I should go on spirit journeys more often, if this is the result."

Lizard found the strength to crawl until he again cradled a much more willing Red Wolf in his arms. "Only Berdaches go on more than one..." Lizard yawned hugely. "One spirit journey, Red Wolf."

"I am not a Berdache." Red Wolf's whole body stiffened, protesting the statement. "I am a simple warrior."

"Yes, you are. Go to sleep. It is nearly first light. We will talk in the morning." He pushed a little with his mind, and forced Red Wolf into slumber, then followed. There would be time for explanations tomorrow.

Chapter Five

Red Wolf awoke as Grub wriggled under the door flap, sending a shaft of bright morning sunlight into his eyes. He caught a glimpse of a white tail, wagging contentedly as Grub disappeared.

The warmth snug against his back was Lizard, who at least was a quiet sleeper. Red Wolf turned over with great care not to wake the sleeping Berdache, and looked at his oldest and best friend with new eyes.

It seemed almost ludicrous to Red Wolf how much power Lizard held in his human frame. He understood only dimly what it was Lizard did. "Bridge between the Worlds" they called all Berdache. Most, like Red Wolf before last night, saw only one who could simultaneously live as a male and a female, equally skilled as both.

Perhaps his regard woke Lizard, for Red Wolf found himself looking into sleepy brown eyes.

"Greetings, Red Wolf. I hope you slept well." Lizard stretched until Red Wolf heard the Berdache's bones crackle.

Lust stirred in Red Wolf's groin again. Unreasonably, it annoyed him that a man, his best friend at that, could heat his blood. He retreated, as he had always done, into a warrior's stone facade. "I slept well. The sun has long risen."

He'd known, of course, that Lizard took pleasure in both sexes. He'd never given it much thought. It was what a Berdache did. Now he envied those men.

Lizard sat up and chuckled. "I have not slept past the sun's rising in many moons. Come. We will bathe in the stream. We stink." He stood, swept up his bag of sand and herbs, untied the door flap, and was out before Red Wolf could do more than stand up.

The warrior sniffed himself. "Faugh! The animals would smell me from far away. Lizard is right."

He followed Lizard to the stream, and was pleasantly surprised by the smiling greetings he got as he passed through the main gathering plaza. Two maidens, returning with a basket from the fields, blushed and flirted with their eyes. The old men grinned smugly and nodded approvingly as he passed. The words he and Lizard had spoken before the lodge had repaired his honor, and people were willing to greet him again.

It was the same upon his return with Lizard. The women in the fields lifted their arms and greeted them with smiles before resuming their work cleaning the field for planting. Even Macawi, who had a sour face of late, cheerfully offered to bring a basket of winter-stored vegetables by the Berdache's lodge. Lizard graciously accepted.

"I must prepare the deer you provided, Red Wolf. Will you speak with me while I do this?" Lizard looked hopefully at Red Wolf.

"I will crack the skull for you while you stretch the hide."

"Good. My thanks. Then, perhaps, if you feel you are permitted, you will tell me of your dream last night?"

"Not where other ears may hear. I know I may tell you alone." Without knowing how he was so certain, Red Wolf was sure no other should listen to their words.

"Then we will move the platform behind my lodge, and speak privately."

Moving the wooden platform and tanning frame took both their efforts. Lizard looked with pride at the new placement. "I've always wanted it back here, for the few moments of peace I may get." He set to work, removing the skin and slitting small holes in the outer edge of the hide to prepare it for the frame.

Red Wolf obligingly took off the head and cracked the skull, laying the brain where Lizard could use it to tan the hide. With it he laid his remaining cake of salt. He could chip off more when next he went hunting.

Lizard listened while his knife remained busy, until Red Wolf had told him the entire dream. Then, he questioned Red Wolf closely for every nuance, his face closed and expressionless.

“The place between the worlds is not the place where warriors walk, except once. You walked there before when you met your spirit guides, did you not?”

Red Wolf nodded. “Yes, during my warrior trials. You know this.”

With the authority his office gave him, Lizard nodded. “I know it, but you walked there once more. Kosumi also implied you will have the opportunity to do so again.”

Red Wolf turned and faced Lizard’s small personal garden plot. It soothed him to see the neat arrangement of plants, some just beginning to show signs of green in the bright sunshine. “I am not a Berdache. I am a warrior.”

A disgusting wet sound made him turn to behold Lizard using the brain and salt to make the first application to tan the hide before the frame was lifted to face the sun. Seeing Lizard covered in blood reminded him of his dream.

“What is a Berdache to you, Red Wolf?” Lizard did not look up as he worked.

“I am not sure anymore, Lizard. Once I thought it was simply that you understood and lived in both the world of men and of women. That you had the power of a shaman to settle arguments between combatants was a different thing. Now, I am not so sure.” He gestured to the hide on the frame, and the garden behind them. “Before, I saw you only do a shaman’s work. Last night, I saw you make war. I am confused.”

“But I was not making war. I fought a battle, according to what you describe. There is a difference. Did you understand what I fought?” Lizard tilted the frame upwards to face the sun. “Let’s move away from the flies who will soon come. We have meat to cut and take to the smokehouse.”

Lizard washed his body using water from a pot, and then began to cut strips from the meat still on the hanging platform. “Do you need pemmican for your next

hunting trip? If you do, we can make some. If not, I will take all but tonight's food to the smokehouse."

Red Wolf nodded. "I need pemmican, yes. Should I get nuts from the storehouse?"

"No. I have them." Lizard's knife flashed as he cut what he would use personally before adding to the village's communal food supply. "Now. Will you answer what it is I fought?"

Red Wolf grunted, pulled out his knife, and joined Lizard in removing strips from the deer meat. "You are like Kosumi. You make me think when I do not wish to. The things you fought against were not the sea and the earth, for you did no harm to them." His brow furrowed. "You fought their anger, and calmed them. You stood between them, even though the island harmed you, and spoke to both."

His thinking caused him to be more careless than usual, and his slices were too thick for pemmican. Lizard removed them to the side. "You cut thick pieces for stew. I will cut thin ones for smoking into pemmican." He stood back to study the carcass, and moved to a new area of the meat. "Yes, I fight anger, sadness, and other bad feelings. You know that in the place between worlds, what the spirits create can be symbols, representing one thing while being another. What did the sea and the earth mean?"

Red Wolf laughed. "I remember stories. The sea is that which creates, and often means females." His knife stilled, and he turned to face Lizard. "Then the angry earth, which ate and destroyed, was males?"

Lizard nodded. "Good." He glanced at Red Wolf and raised a sly eyebrow.

So, there was more, Red Wolf concluded. He thought again. "The steam. The thick air was hard to breathe. It stank. It came from their battle." He made the intuitive leap. "Their anger harmed others and made life difficult."

Lizard gathered up the meat. The larger pieces Red Wolf cut went into a pot, and the thin strips into a bundle of cured hide. He handed the bundle to the warrior. "Take this to the smokehouse. I will start the stew. When you return, we will finish this

conversation inside my lodge." His eyes flickered to the back of the neighboring lodge, and his smile was wicked.

Red Wolf caught a glimpse of a curious adolescent face peeping around the side. As soon as the boy knew he'd been spotted, he ran.

While he cleaned his knife, Lizard muttered, "The whole village must be very curious if they send a long-eared rabbit to listen to our words." He chuckled. "No doubt Halian is running for his life. He knows better than to spy on a senior warrior and the Berdache."

Red Wolf's lips twitched. "I will speak with the keeper of adolescent boys later. Halian is full of mischief, but he means no harm. He was very good. I did not see him. I will recommend he be given to the warrior who trains scouts for extra learning."

Red Wolf took the bundle and left, just in time to see Grub trot past him. He heard Lizard laugh and admonish, "You almost forgot your reward, didn't you? Here are your entrails."

He had much to think on, and took his time going to the smokehouse where the old women took his bundle in silence and hung it on the racks above a smoldering fire.

So, Lizard prevented conflict between men and women. This made it pleasant for all, for when one couple was not in harmony, all in the village suffered. It was not hard to imagine a war chief who was angry with his wife being more likely to raise the hammer of war. A woman who was sad or angry worked less well, and made others miserable.

Had he, Red Wolf, been soothed by Lizard's deft skills? No, he didn't think so. He had gone to the slave maiden and repaired his own honor. Lizard had merely been a good friend to offer him a place to sleep. Red Wolf had even provided the deer, so all was fair.

Red Wolf stepped off the main walking path back to Lizard's lodge, and skirted the other lodges until he walked around the edge of the village. He had one more thing he must think on -- what Lizard and he had done last night, and how he felt about it. He'd never been so satisfied. Then he shrugged. Why not? Lizard had been the only one

all his life who understood his ambitions to be the perfect warrior. Why should it not be Lizard who also brought him the greatest pleasure?

When he returned, Lizard sat in comfort within the lodge, stirring the savory stew. Lizard pointed with his stick to a pot in the corner. "Wash the blood off your body, Red Wolf. You will attract insects from their work of stripping the hide." He pointed to a bundle, wrapped in a familiar wolf pelt. "Blue Bird brought your clothes from her lodge. She wishes you well."

Though his pride stung a little, Red Wolf shrugged. "I wish her well, too." Something eased in his chest. He did wish her well. She had not been a bad wife, and she was a good mother. He stripped off his loincloth and washed.

He felt Lizard's eyes upon him, like the warmth of a fire. His buttocks tightened, and so did his groin, even with the cold of the water upon it. He licked his lips, and turned to face Lizard. "I am not a Berdache, but I can answer the question you do not ask. I am not unhappy about last night." He cleared his throat. "Yes, I want to learn more." He sat across from Lizard and sniffed the stew eagerly.

Lizard looked at him with cool eyes and would not be distracted. "You still have not answered my question, Red Wolf. What is a Berdache to you, now that you have been on the spirit journey?"

"Another kind of warrior. One who ends conflicts before they begin, or when they are small." Red Wolf blurted this out as if it were ripped from him by pain.

"And are you not a warrior?"

The trap was there, and he could not avoid it. "Yes, I am. But not that kind. I am not one who thinks. I am one who is. Who does."

"Would you rather fight a war that involves many warriors, or one that involves two?"

Red Wolf sat in silence, knowing if he answered truthfully, he trapped himself by his own words. He felt the trap closing, and raged against it. Such a truth did not make him a Berdache. "You are one kind of warrior and I am another. This makes me no less

a warrior because I fight when you have lost your war." He grinned in triumph, proud of his logic.

"Do not think to bait me, Red Wolf. We return to another part of your statement. You think every time you go into battle. You see a tree a warrior can hide in or behind. You note the wind is blowing a certain direction, and how it will change how your arrows fly. You think before you do a thing. Does not your thought lead to action?" He put down his stick. "The time for truth is now. I think you are a Berdache, Red Wolf."

Red Wolf stood. "There is more to being a Berdache than the actions of a warrior." As the Berdache, Lizard could only speak truth. Therefore, he really believed Red Wolf was two-souled. That meant Lizard thought Red Wolf was not the perfect warrior, and should change. That did not bear thinking about.

"As a man and a woman are different, and yet may have the same desires, needs, and drives, so a Berdache and a warrior are different. Both serve the People when it comes to making war or avoiding it."

Red Wolf folded his arms angrily. "What makes you think I have the other qualities of a Berdache? I have no wish to learn a woman's skills!"

The Berdache's voice was as soft as a caress and as implacable as stone. "Have you not taken a spirit journey unprepared? This is the first sign. Have you not tried to heal a hurt in me? This is the second sign. There are others."

Shocked into silence, Red Wolf trembled with anger and denial. Finally, curiosity drove him to ask, "What others?" He bit the words off, knowing he would not like the answers.

"We will discuss those later." He paused. "When you are prepared to hear them."

Rage built in Red Wolf's heart until it was a ravening beast. "You sound like my father," he growled and turned to go out into the night. He would regain his warrior's calm in the cold night air, dressed only in a loincloth. That would keep him from doing harm.

"More like your mother," Lizard laughed.

Red Wolf stormed blindly out of the lodge. So great was his anger that he feared to cause himself dishonor by snarling at the next person he saw. He stalked toward the woods, hoping to lose himself in the shadows until he calmed. He would sleep in the woods and begin to build his own lodge. He wanted -- no, needed -- to be alone.

The spirits willed it otherwise. He'd only moved beyond the covered opening of Lizard's lodge long enough for the cold night to hit him more viciously than any war club, when he heard his name called from the direction of the war chief's lodge.

The war chief trotted over. "I am glad to see you have not left for hunting, Red Wolf. A runner has come to the village chief's home. Two small villages, one Choctaw and one Chickasaw, argue over the right to hunt a small island on a lake. The Choctaw ask for intercession of the Berdache, and the Chickasaw do not have one of their own nearby. You will go to guard the Berdache, and take the Chickasaw slave woman with you for help in translation." He leaned over. "I trust you with this, because the maiden may also be used in trade to bring peace. You will need to keep her safe as well."

Trapped. He could not simply go build his own lodge and leave Lizard's knowing ways. It was an honor to escort the Berdache. He could not reasonably refuse.

Red Wolf nodded. "We will go tell Lizard."

Chapter Six

Lizard tramped behind Red Wolf, following the barely-discernable path that was the main trade route between the Choctaw and Chickasaw lands. The light step behind told him that the slave maiden, Moon, was having no trouble keeping up with the blistering pace Red Wolf set, despite the warrior's growing illness.

Moon had been more than equal to the task of serving the needs of their small traveling band. She gathered herbs as they walked, stowing them in her pouch to provide tasty additions to the game Red Wolf brought down each night. Even her Choctaw had improved in the two weeks they had been walking the trade route.

The tired Berdache glanced at the sun, beginning to make its slow descent behind the trees. Spring had not reached this far north, and the nights were chill. Red Wolf would soon leave them behind to find the next campsite along the trail, placing his pack there to mark the place, and then hunt.

Even as he thought this, Red Wolf set off at a trot, glancing once over his shoulder to let Lizard know it was time. He staggered once, then regained his balance and moved out of sight. Lizard sighed, and his heart ached for his friend, but until Red Wolf admitted to his illness, nothing could be done.

Moon sighed. "We will make camp soon, yes?" When Lizard nodded, she ran up to walk beside Lizard when the path allowed. "I am grateful when he goes to hunt. Red Wolf grows more surly every day."

"I cannot deny this, Moon. It is his dreams. He does not sleep." Lizard could only feel pity for Red Wolf, who now refused to sleep at all for fear of the dreams that haunted him whenever he closed his eyes.

The dreams were a warning sign that soon Red Wolf would begin to go slowly into the world between, seeing spirits even when he was awake, hearing voices no one

else could discern, and fighting unseen things. He made the problem worse for himself by refusing to rest. In the next stage when he fought unseen things he might kill his companions, mistaking them for something else.

“Moon, I would ask a task of you. You may refuse it, if you wish.” Lizard chose to speak very softly. Red Wolf might be nearby. His ability to hunt and hide remained sharp, despite his difficulties.

The maiden leaned close. “Ask, then. Is it about Red Wolf?”

“Yes. Can you beg to take his weapons and clean them for him for the next several nights? He will want to keep one, but if you can remove the others from easy reach, this would help me.”

He didn’t want to explain why, but Moon nodded with a wise look in her eyes. “He will soon harm himself if he does not sleep, Berdache. He has not touched me or asked for sex since... since... er...” She cleared her throat.

Lizard grinned. “Nor from me, maiden. We both had him the same night.” He had grown very fond of Moon since they’d left. She was always cheerful, and looked at the world as a great game to be played. Yet, she never shirked her duties and was wise beyond her years.

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Good! Then we may both share delights with him. It will help him sleep. The spirits are not so unkind as to speak with the sated.”

Lizard stopped walking and turned to Moon with his jaw dropping. “You understand what is happening to him?”

Moon tugged on Lizard’s arm and got him walking again. “It is unimportant, but I am the daughter of a Wise Woman of the Chickasaw.” She shrugged. “I chose a different art, but I still learned much from my mother.” She stooped and pulled a handful of wild garlic from the side of the path, then continued on.

A small clearing ahead was obviously their destination for the night. Red Wolf’s pack lay atop a boulder. Both Lizard and Moon sighed in relief and took off their own burdens.

A place scraped bare of all dirt showed the unmistakable signs of previous use for a fire, even including a large flat cooking stone across the top. With a pleased sound, Moon went to work starting a fire from the collection of kindling she bore, and took out her tiny pot of coals she fed all day to keep it alight. Lizard scoured the local area for wood, and they soon had a cheerfully blazing fire to ward away the cold.

Lizard kept his eye on the trees, and spoke softly to Moon. "You wish to serve Red Wolf tonight, if we can convince him to stay in the clearing with us?"

"With all my being, Berdache, though he may wish for pleasure from you alone. It must be tonight. I recognize this place. We are not far from the lands of my birth. We must make Red Wolf safe from the spirits quickly. How shall we do this?"

"I am not sure, Moon. We dare not simply ambush and trap him. He is a warrior."

A crackle of a stick being trod upon startled them both. It was an indication of how bad things were for Red Wolf that he made such a noise. Warriors were normally so silent, he should have been able to approach within a few steps before they noticed. Instead, Red Wolf came into the clearing, pale beneath his copper skin, and his eyes swollen and red. He threw down a pair of rabbits, and lurched into Lizard.

Lizard managed to catch his friend before Red Wolf fell. Red Wolf's eyes rolled back into his head, and only Lizard's arms saved him from an ignominious crash to the ground.

Moon leapt up to help Lizard lower Red Wolf's unconscious body near the fire. She quirked one eyebrow at Lizard and her lips twitched as she helped settle the warrior comfortably. "I am grateful he did that here, instead of in the woods. I will get his bedroll."

She efficiently laid out the mat from Red Wolf's pack, and covered it with a wolf pelt. When they had muscled the unconscious warrior onto the comfortable bed, Moon sat back on her heels and looked at Lizard.

"What do we do now, Berdache? We cannot act upon our plan while he visits the place between worlds." Her trusting eyes begged Lizard for an answer.

Lizard pulled out his own bedroll and sat upon it, within easy reach of Red Wolf. He carefully removed all his friend's weapons, and handed them to Moon. "We wait, and we watch." His smile was sweet and pleading. "I see no reason to starve when Red Wolf so kindly brought us a fine dinner."

Laughing, Moon set to work skinning the rabbits.

* * *

Red Wolf walked the place between worlds in despair. No longer a land of endless and beautiful summer, it was a dark forest where storms raged. The wind was icy cold and sharp needles of rain stung his naked skin. He had been here many times lately, and with each visit, the land grew harsher and angrier.

No loincloth covered him, and he had no weapons of any kind save his hands.

One by one, each time he came here, his weapons disappeared. The last time, he had his loincloth and knife at least, to make him feel a little safe. Now, he had nothing.

Stoically, he had kept silent and waited until he was released from this world. This time, his silence bought him nothing. A sharp lash of wind and sleet cut him on the chest, and he cried out. For a moment, the wind stilled at the sound of his voice, and then resumed its punishing treatment. Had the sound of his voice given him that moment of peace?

He found himself standing at the bluff edge, where he had watched Lizard chanting soothing words to the sea and earth. He had not heard more than the calm tone of Lizard's voice then, and did not know the words to say, but he decided to try.

Taking a deep breath, Red Wolf sang the only song he knew. It was a song sung to children to get them to sleep, naming all the spirit animals and their functions in the world. "If you talk to the animals," he sang, "they will talk to you, and you will know each other."

The wind heard the traditional words that began the lullaby, and calmed, as if to listen. The rain gentled, and became warmer.

He sang to it the next lines, "If you do not talk to them, you will not know them."

The rain stopped, and the clouds moved more slowly. The lullaby was soothing the elements.

He sang to the clouds, "What you do not know, you will fear. What one fears, one destroys."

The clouds parted, and showed a full and bright moon to light his way. He kept singing, trying to remember all the animals and their duties. "Otter remembers joy, sharing, and play. Deer is gentle and innocent, and gently lures us to adventure. Deer is the friend of man."

To his shock and amazement, an otter appeared, peeping over the grasses and winking in a friendly manner. A large stag, with a great rack of horns, came to stand calmly beside the otter, and dipped his head in tribute before swiveling his ears around to listen.

So, he called to the animal spirits when he sang about them? This bore thinking upon. He needed a friend to help him. This called for patience and thought. He decided to sing about his own totems. Perhaps his friends who had promised to walk with him on his life journey would come.

"Bear is the power," he sang. "Bear is the brother because he walks upright like man. He teaches us to find the things we need to survive." A large black bear came into view, and sat down on his haunches.

Red Wolf's heart swelled with hope. It was time to call his special totem, the one he was named for, and the one he loved the most. "Wolf is the guardian, the loyal one, who lives by the rules always," he chanted, sure his friend would come. "Wolf is the great communicator, who teaches us not to waste anything, not even ourselves. Wolf does not fight unnecessarily."

His words faltered. Not fight unnecessarily? Wasn't that what a Berdache did? To stop discord when it was small? Was his totem showing him he really was a Berdache?

The red wolf, with its distinctive long legs, appeared at the edge of the clearing. Instead of sitting as the other did, it wagged its tail and gave its wolfish grin. "You have

learned," it said in a booming voice. "Now we will take you back to those who love you as much as we." The wolf turned and looked back over his shoulder.

With that, the entire group of animals stood and waited for Red Wolf to join them. Bear lumbered beside him, with the stag on the other side. Otter played and occasionally leapt into his arms for a ride and a nuzzling fish-breathed kiss to Red Wolf's shoulder, only to jump back down when something interested him.

The bright moon shone down, and reflected off a huge spider's web just before they stepped into a clearing. Red Wolf stopped to make obeisance before Grandmother Spider, and was rewarded with a chuckle. "We will see you again, Red Wolf," came the rasping voice of an old woman from the center of the web, where a large black spider swayed gently in the light, warm evening breeze. "Don't fight us so hard, and things will be pleasant."

Red Wolf bowed. "I will listen, next time, Grandmother."

"Go to your rest, Red Wolf. Your loved ones will keep you safe," she answered.

Wolf and Bear lay down on each side of him, and he took the hint. He stretched himself out between them, and Otter cuddled in his arms. Deer stood watch near his head, scanning the trees. Red Wolf sighed in contentment and made himself comfortable with his furry friends. He was instantly asleep.

* * *

He awoke to find reality mirrored his dreams. He lay on his favorite wolf pelt, and was covered with Lizard's preferred bear pelt. Moon lay cuddled in his arms where Otter had been, and Lizard stood watch near his head, scanning the trees.

Lizard's head turned, and his eyes were as soft as Deer's had been, and just as loving. Red Wolf smiled to let his dearest friend know all was well. Lizard's slow smile in return was happy and as contented as Red Wolf himself felt.

Red Wolf opened his other arm, inviting Lizard to join himself and Moon. Lizard raised an eyebrow for a moment, then moved his bedroll next to Red Wolf on the side opposite Moon.

When Lizard was comfortable in the hollow of Red Wolf's shoulder, he whispered, "So, you solved your own problem once again, my friend?"

"Yes, with a little help from some friends." He gathered Lizard up and kissed him, long and sweet. "We are safe now, with the spirits to guard us. Tomorrow we have much to do to soothe angry hearts."

Part of Red Wolf was eager, and his *chodis* rose to become a stalk at the memory of his pleasure before. Part of him was still nervous and fearful. Then, Moon sat up, her eyes smiling with mischief. Her otter claw necklace winked once in the moonlight, as eager as her totem for play.

The reminder that these were "those who loved him most" was enough to bring peace and quiet his fear. Here with him were the living representatives of Otter and Deer. A warrior could not ask for more than this. He would provide the spirit of Wolf to the lodge.

To show that he loved them both without words, Red Wolf caressed Lizard's face, and then bent to kiss Moon. Lizard's eyes shone for a moment.

Moon, already naked for sleep, fumbled and tugged at Red Wolf's loincloth. With Lizard's assistance, it finally fell away. Red Wolf pulled away from Moon. "Lizard remains clothed. This is not proper, do you agree, Moon?"

Her eyes dancing, Moon nodded thoughtfully. "I agree, Red Wolf. The Berdache should be naked too."

Chuckling, Lizard pretended maidenly shyness, but was easily captured when Moon and Red Wolf pounced on him. Giggling, Moon lavished attention to his nipples while Red Wolf divested him of his loincloth and bearskin cape.

Lizard raised his hand, and removed Moon from his nipples so he could see her face. "You know that you may be a gift to the Chickasaw, if it brings peace. We dare not make you pregnant. This would be an insult to your people. But I will promise you pleasure. It is well with you?"

Her nipples were hard as pebbles, and Moon pouted, but nodded. "I would rather stay with you, but I know the importance of what we do. I drink stone tea." She

made a face against the bitter brew that was the best they had to prevent pregnancy. "Even so, we must not risk it failing this time."

"Good. I would prefer to keep you. But we will do what is necessary." Then, Lizard smiled. "What is needed now is Red Wolf's lesson." He knelt in front of Red Wolf, and beckoned Moon to join him. "We will share."

The licking and tasting of two experienced mouths made Red Wolf want to bay at the moon like his namesake. One small, soft sensation where Moon took his *chodis* in, one firmer and stronger to suck in his berry sack. Red Wolf put his hands on each head.

"I would prefer to have something to taste," he suggested in between the deep breaths.

Lizard released his berries. "You will have it, then."

Both took their places on their mats. Moon and Lizard placed their feet near his head and resumed their work. Lizard's hand moved across Red Wolf's belly to play with Moon's swinging breasts as she eagerly changed position to her hands and knees.

Lizard lay on his side, and raised one knee. His flexible long body made it easy for him to rest his head on Red Wolf's thigh and take the berry sack back in his mouth.

Red Wolf took the invitation, and leaned forward to suck in Lizard's berry sack and mirror all that was done to him by Lizard. He was not as flexible as Lizard, and there were minor adjustments before all were busy pleasuring one another.

The sounds of licking and sucking and tiny moans of pleasure were arousing enough to Red Wolf, but what was done to his body even more so. Yet, it was nothing new. Well, the inclusion of Moon was new. He was glad to know a female could still entice him. That had been a worry.

Lizard lifted his head. "I am feeling the fires now." He rolled away and knelt to dig into his pack. Red Wolf watched with half-lidded eyes, since Moon had not stopped her work. He reached over and dipped his fingers into her warmth, and began to tickle the tiny pink flower where all females enjoyed being touched.

Moon moaned and wriggled until he could reach her easily, asking for all he would give with her body.

Lizard brandished a small pot and patted Moon on her round behind. "On your back, Moon," he ordered.

Moon looked up and grinned. "I obey the Berdache!" She flipped on her back, falling on her mat happily, and spreading her legs to display her willing wetness.

Lizard knelt over Moon's head and facing her feet to allow her to take his *chodis* in her mouth, and then gasped. "Moon is very good at this!" He handed the pot to Red Wolf. "Use this bear grease on your stalk. I will take what Moon cannot, since we dare not touch her with our stalks, in any manner." His eyes flashed in challenge to Red Wolf.

Red Wolf stared for a moment until he slowly understood what Lizard meant by taking what Moon could not. His eyes widened. Could he do this? Would it not cause harm? He looked at the pot and prayed it contained enough magic to work. He shrugged, and trusted. The grease was slightly cool, but did not make him yelp. In fact, it felt good to slather it and use his hand to ease the ache.

Lizard watched until he was satisfied Red Wolf had done as he was asked, then put his face between Moon's legs. His hair covered what he did, but Moon's muffled squeal said she found it to her liking.

Swallowing hard, Red Wolf crawled over to kneel behind Lizard. Moon's eyes were shut, and her mouth busy. She seemed unconcerned about what was to take place so near her.

Lizard raised his head as he felt Red Wolf poised to enter. "Go slowly, my friend. It will be worth the wait," he cajoled softly.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Red Wolf pushed in. Lizard's body closed around the tip of his stalk, and seemed to urge him in further. He moved as slowly as he could, until he felt a new barrier. Yet, he felt it give way before him, and he kept pushing until he could go no further. His *chodis* was wrapped tightly, much more tightly than a woman could do. His breathing quickened with arousal, sounding harsh to his ears.

Lizard threw back his head, his own breathing deep and rasping. "Moon makes me long to release, and what you do is even better. Move, Red Wolf, move! Bring us all to release."

After holding himself so still, Red Wolf's body trembled with the need to thrust, and he obeyed with abandon, groaning and gasping for air.

There was nothing to compare to this feeling. Every upstroke made Lizard shudder with delight, and every down stroke made him want to howl with pleasure. He did not want it to end. If it were half as pleasurable for Lizard as it was for him, he was eager for the experience.

Lizard cried out once, and buried his face deeply between Moon's legs. Like a fire that moved, Moon next moaned, and Red Wolf felt her reach up around his thigh to play gently with his berry sack.

Never before had Red Wolf been squeezed so delightfully, nor had his berries played with while he buried himself with ecstasy. He cried out his joy, and released deeply into Lizard's willing body.

Lizard and Moon joined him in the pleasure, each moaning and bucking. Red Wolf did not want to stop. Never had he known so much pleasure, and thought he might actually fly with eagles.

Eventually, even he was spent. Red Wolf removed himself as slowly as he had entered, though Lizard's body seemed reluctant to let him go. Lizard moaned with joy and fell forward until only his legs were tangled with Moon's. She did not seem to mind but lay sprawled on her mat, panting and licking her lips.

Red Wolf agreed that falling on the ground was an excellent idea, but managed grace and control enough to catch himself on his hands and roll with dignity onto his own mat. His energy spent, he willed himself to breathe.

Lizard and Moon found the strength to crawl into their places in his arms. Red Wolf kissed them both. "I have been a fool." He drew breath. "I have wasted too much time on perfection and too little on love. If this is being a Berdache, then I am eager to learn more."

Moon's sleepy mumble was unintelligible, but Lizard kissed his shoulder. "Then more you will learn."

Chapter Seven

The trio walked into the village of the disputing Choctaw late the next afternoon. Sentries had seen them and been acknowledged by Red Wolf hours before, so the elders were assembled and waiting when they arrived.

Moon followed last in line, so only Lizard heard her tiny smothered gasp of surprise. He turned, and saw she stared at an older man who likewise stared back at her with equal surprise. Whatever passed between them went unsaid, but Moon smiled at the old man and nodded. When Moon saw that Lizard noticed her distraction, she put her head down and moved quickly to kneel alone to the side.

The older man's eyes followed her every move with great intensity, his eyes actually moistening with unshed tears. He sat with the Chickasaw group, so Lizard assumed he not only knew Moon, he was likely a relative. To see Moon alive and seemingly happy would please any relative to tears. If Moon was given back to the Chickasaw in trade for peace, at least she would go to loving arms.

There was no time to speculate further. Red Wolf, acting as his guard, now stood near the village chiefs. Lizard, as the Berdache, was required to listen to the long speeches of welcome, eat the foods prepared, and spend long hours into the night hearing the words of all the disputing parties.

The chief of the Choctaw village rose to his feet and began his speech. He was a practical man, and first ordered that the Berdache's warrior guard and woman were offered a lodge. Red Wolf and Lizard inclined their heads graciously, and so the chief's wife led Moon to the lodge that would be their home until matters were settled. Their packs were given to a junior warrior who had been awarded the honor of serving as their personal assistant. He followed Moon and the chief's wife with his burdens. Red Wolf took his position, sitting behind Lizard.

Welcomed and seated, Lizard began the difficult task of diplomacy. It would be a long night.

* * *

Red Wolf tried desperately to keep awake. The moon was beginning to set, and still the men smoked pipes and talked. To Red Wolf, all had been said. The Choctaw and the Chickasaw both used an island on a nearby lake for fishing. No game lived on the tiny speck of land unless it swam there and decided to stay.

"Our ancestors fished there!" called one Chickasaw. "It is Chickasaw."

"Our ancestors fished there as well," called one of the Choctaw. "It is Choctaw!"

The dispute was so petty to Red Wolf that he wanted to beat them all. He bowed his head so none would see the contempt in his eyes. That movement was a mistake, for he found his mind wandering. A pinch on his thigh had him sitting upright and glaring at a mischievous Lizard, who listened attentively to the same arguments that had been repeated many times.

Lizard waited until the next man had finished his argument, and lifted his hand for silence. "We are not ravens to caw unceasingly. I will think on these things and sleep," he declared, much to Red Wolf's joy.

With relief showing on their faces, the disputants emptied their pipes and left. Clearly, they had worn themselves out, and even the younger warriors rose stiffly to their feet.

Lizard flowed to a standing position as if he had not been sitting on his rump without moving for many hours. Red Wolf got to his feet and ignored how his muscles ached. The junior warrior appeared, blinking owlshly, and led them to their lodge, then left silently for his own lodge.

Moon had sat with the women at the feast, and retired with them when the men began their discussion. Her translation services had not been needed. Out of deference to Lizard, they'd all used the trade tongue. They found her curled up on her mat, fast asleep. Both men grinned at seeing she had laid their mats in the arrangement they had enjoyed the previous evening, with Red Wolf's in the middle.

Lizard tugged on Red Wolf's arm and led him back outside to the covered porch outside their lodge. He lifted his pipe, and winked. "I wish to discuss your feelings about tonight while we enjoy one last pipe and settle our thoughts."

Red Wolf snorted and sat. "Their argument is as silly as two wolf cubs growling over a bone with no meat. The island is nothing."

Choosing a spot next to Red Wolf, Lizard filled his pipe with deliberate slowness. Moon had thriftily banked the small fire in front of where they sat, and laid a few small sticks nearby to restart the fire in the morning. Lizard sank one into the coals and used it to light his pipe. "Then why do they argue, do you think?"

The pipe was passed to Red Wolf, who drew on it and pondered. "Greed? No. There is nothing to possess. Pride. I think it may be pride. They wish to gain a point of pride against each other." He handed the pipe back.

Lifting the pipe, Lizard puffed thoughtfully. "I agree. This has nothing to do with a worthless hunting ground. They wish to count coup against one another. Why do you think this is so?"

Red Wolf took the pipe back, but did not draw. "I am not sure. But pride is the failure of warriors." He grinned, knowing he had his own full pouch of pride.

"Then, proud warrior, what would make a warrior seek to win nocks for his arrow case?" Lizard teased, glancing at Red Wolf's quiver of arrows, with its many notches that marked conflicts won.

Now Red Wolf sucked on the pipe. "Since there are no slights or insults claimed by either village, I will guess boredom."

"Boredom?" Lizard rubbed his eyes, which only now were beginning to redden. "Yes, men who prefer action do not like to be still and silent. Soon, they would look for reasons to have something to do they knew well."

"Then we must think of something that warriors may do which fills their pride other than making war." Red Wolf shrugged.

"We?" Lizard repeated.

“Yes. I did not tell you of my dream in front of Moon. She will know in time, when I choose to tell her.” He outlined the dream briefly, leaving no detail out. “I noticed this morning that Moon wears an otter’s claw on her necklace.”

Lizard smothered a laugh. “Yes, my main spirit animal is Deer. So, you will let me help you learn, now, as Bear symbolized?”

“Yes.” Red Wolf reached over and tugged on Lizard’s long hair. “When we return to our home village, I will learn.” He grasped a handful of Lizard’s hair at the nape of Lizard’s neck, and used it to pull the Berdache close. “But you have other things to teach me first.”

The Berdache did not fight, but leaned in until his breath teased Red Wolf’s lips. “Gladly.”

“Good,” came a sleepy feminine voice from inside their lodge. “Come in and take your lesson. I will help.”

Red Wolf raised an eyebrow and Lizard snickered. “Yes, Mother,” Lizard teased. Lizard knocked the tobacco from his pipe into the ashes, and pulled Red Wolf inside.

Red Wolf went eagerly, and yet with some fear. He knew in his heart what was to come. The bear grease was for him, this night. His heart seemed loud in his chest, and his step faltered despite his wish to be a brave warrior.

He held firmly to the memory of the time he had enjoyed what he had done to Lizard. His dearest friend had responded with happy moans and told him in many ways how pleasant it had been. Would Red Wolf feel the same?

Lizard turned to Red Wolf and pulled him close. “Don’t be afraid, Red Wolf. I will ensure it does not hurt you.” His caress was gentle and caring.

Moon smiled and rose. “I have changed my mind. I wish to swim in the lake. I will return when I am done.” She pulled on her clothes and left without looking back.

Red Wolf relaxed slightly when the door flap closed behind her. He thanked the spirits that Moon was kind and gave them privacy. Now all he had to do was wish there was great magic in the bear grease.

Lizard divested himself of the shirt and leggings of his profession, taking care to put the feathered garments aside where they would come to no harm. He turned and his eyes were as sweet as a doe's. He placed the pot of grease near the fire, and came to stand before Red Wolf. "I understand your concerns, my friend. I hope you will trust me."

Frozen to the spot where fear had him rooted, Red Wolf could only nod silently. He could not admit his anxiety, not even to Lizard.

Leaning forward, Lizard whispered, "I will show you how to release the beast within without fear. We will do this first." He nipped at Red Wolf's neck until Red Wolf's eyes half-closed in lust.

To keep his balance at this assault on his senses, Red Wolf's arms stole around Lizard and his hands clasped the firm buttocks they found. Yes, the memory of his *chodis* sliding in between them to enter Lizard's body reminded him how good it felt to love a man. His previously flaccid stalk rose, and his groin heated, even without being touched.

Lizard pressed close and switched to the other side. His hands found the thong holding up Red Wolf's loincloth and removed the whole garment with a tug. Red Wolf heard it impact the wall of the lodge and slither to the floor with the force of Lizard's toss. "Come to my mat, Red Wolf. I wish to taste your stalk again."

This was something Red Wolf was more than agreeable to do. He was not as graceful as Lizard in getting to the mat, but he put his back on the soft buckskin willingly.

Lizard's *chodis* was erect and full, ready for tasting. Red Wolf reached for it hungrily, but Lizard moved away until he knelt between his lover's legs. "Tonight is for your pleasure, Red Wolf. Let me do this for you." Lizard's pleasure would be found between the globes of Red Wolf's ass tonight.

The thought was withering, but Lizard dove like a stooping hawk to plunge Red Wolf's stalk down his throat in a practiced move. The warmth and pressure of his tongue was enough to make Red Wolf groan aloud. Lizard's head bobbed expertly and

slowly to draw the pleasure from Red Wolf's berry sack, while his hand stroked and played.

Red Wolf closed his eyes, lost in the tugging sensations. A small scrape intruded on his hearing only for a moment, ignored in the overwhelming delight caused by Lizard's talented mouth and throat.

Warmth trailed down from below his berry sack to his ass. Lizard's finger caressed with love and care, and Red Wolf delighted in the sensation. Even when that heated finger touched his anal opening, it was pleasurable in the extreme and he couldn't help the moan that slipped from his lips.

Lizard paused for a moment. Red Wolf looked down at his lover's questioning eyes. He knew what Lizard was asking permission to do.

Drawing a long, shaking breath, Red Wolf lay his head back down. "Yes," he whispered to the shadows in the thatched ceiling.

The warm finger slipped inside. It felt huge, and Red Wolf's body closed around the intrusion. Yet, it felt good. Very good.

Lizard did not move until Red Wolf adjusted and relaxed a tiny amount. Then, he resumed his work on Red Wolf's aching *chodis*, giving a welcome distraction. The tugging and suction did not mean Red Wolf could not notice when a second finger joined the first and rewarded Red Wolf with a tickling movement inside.

Red Wolf was overwhelmed with the pleasure, and he gasped before shutting his eyes to better enjoy. "By the spirits, Lizard," he panted. "No wonder you like this."

The fingers moved again, and a third joined them. Red Wolf fought the urge to howl. Tightness and a minor twinge of pain were overridden by a sensation close to ecstasy. He felt his berries move, ready to release. Nothing he had ever felt came close to this joy.

Lizard lifted his head. "I would be happy to swallow your juices, Red Wolf, but I would prefer to replace my fingers with something that has no hard fingernails to hurt you. Will you allow this?"

Disappointment warred with a willingness to continue the new and very delightful experiences. Red Wolf considered, then nodded. The fingers exited with great care, one by one. Without needing to be told to do so, Red Wolf rolled over and rose to his hands and knees.

He watched as Lizard used more bear grease on his own stalk, then Red Wolf shuddered as more of the warm lubricant was applied around and in his anus. He forced himself to stay relaxed and focused on the pleasure he'd already discovered.

Lizard positioned himself between Red Wolf's knees, and his *chodis* teased at the opening to Red Wolf's body. "I will not harm you, Red Wolf," Lizard promised, and slid in carefully.

After but a moment of uncomfortable tightness, the pleasure returned, doubled. "This is better," Red Wolf forced out between gasping breaths.

The need for release grew stronger. Lizard moved so slowly that Red Wolf lost his fear and began to push back against his lover's forward movement. A second barrier within himself opened without hesitation, and an instant later, Red Wolf felt Lizard's heavy berry sack caress his own.

Lizard did not move, except for one tiny thrust, which put him at the deepest penetration. "Now, Red Wolf, I will show you what I could not explain in words."

He pulled back, and Red Wolf understood at once. There was no description for the thrill coursing through his body, making his spirit within sing with delight. Every movement Lizard made increased the enjoyment. Red Wolf did not attempt to stop the moans torn from his throat with every upstroke Lizard made.

Red Wolf could not believe there was more joy possible, until Lizard bent forward and reached to take the warrior's stalk into his grease-slicked hand. It would be a race to see who finished first, and neither would lose. In the end, it did not matter. So great was the ecstasy for Red Wolf, that he did not care. His berries moved upward and shot like arrows from a bow, barely giving him warning.

Lizard's thrusts became more forceful and shorter, but he kept his hand busy milking Red Wolf's *chodis* dry of every drop until no more came forth. His harsh pants filled the lodge and mingled with the occasional night sounds of insects.

Red Wolf reveled in the delight each movement brought, and wondered if this sensation of many waves of pleasure would continue for many moons. However, Lizard pulled himself upright, and grasped Red Wolf's hips. "I... love... you... Red Wolf," he panted in time to his release, for the warrior felt the heated beads of pleasure fill him. Every hot, tiny arrow was accompanied by another short thrust, and Red Wolf welcomed them into himself with joy too near to pain for words.

Lizard draped his body over Red Wolf's back, too spent to do anything more. Red Wolf bore him gently to the mat, until both breathed more easily.

Raining kisses and licks on Red Wolf's back, Lizard withdrew as carefully as he had entered. "Thank you for your trust in me."

Red Wolf rolled over, catching Lizard unawares until they lay together on Red Wolf's soft wolf pelt. Lizard sighed in Red Wolf's arms and put his head on the broad, scarred chest beneath him.

"I love you too, Lizard," he murmured into the Berdache's hair. Then, he knew no more until Moon stole into his arms sometime during the night. He drew her close, and slept on.

Chapter Eight

Lizard came out the door flap the next morning to find the warrior who had stared at Moon so intently waiting patiently by the small fire in front of the lodge. Lizard raised one eyebrow, and said, "Greetings, Warrior of the Chickasaw." What did he want? The Berdache, or Moon? He barely remembered this man who had sat silently all last night.

The warrior's smile was tense. "Greetings, Berdache. I am Chayton, war chief of the Chickasaw village. Forgive me for intruding on your morning, but I hope to make words with my daughter."

Lizard heard the plea that Chayton would not say aloud, but before he could answer, Moon's head popped out of the door flap. "Father!" she cried, and came out to leap into his arms.

There was no formal meeting with its endless protocols to follow, so Lizard saw no reason why father and daughter could not make words and be family. He smiled, and bit into a corn cake.

Chayton relaxed and hugged Moon. "All is well with you, my daughter? We thought you were dead these past two winters. Do you study with the Berdache now?"

Moon blushed, but Lizard wiped his mouth and answered. "Though I did not know her skills until recently, yes, I claim her as a student." He smiled as Moon widened her eyes, knowing this meant her freedom from slavery. "She is skilled, and I am pleased."

The Chickasaw war chief's eyes gleamed. "I am honored, Berdache." His true feelings showed in a tightening of his arms around Moon. "Your mother will rejoice to know you live and bring honor to our clan."

Red Wolf pushed his way through the door flap and took in the scene. "All is well, Moon?"

Grinning despite the tears of happiness in her eyes, Moon nodded. "All is well, Red Wolf. This is my father, Chayton, war chief of the Chickasaw."

Lizard intervened to stop the questions he could see forming in Red Wolf's eyes. "Chayton is honored that Born in Moonlight is now my student."

Nodding, Chayton's eyes did not leave Red Wolf. "I would be more pleased to hear this is your husband." The hope in his eyes spoke many words to Lizard.

Moon laughed cheerfully, easing the seriousness of the conversation. "Though I would be delighted, the time is not right for me to join with Red Wolf. He too studies with the Berdache, and guards us well."

Red Wolf took in the changes to Moon's status with all the cool stoicism expected of him. He folded his arms. "It may be that, in time, I will take Moon to be my wife. But now is not good."

A senior warrior of the Chickasaw approached. He did not look at anyone but Chayton. "All are assembled to await the Berdache's words." His voice dripped with contempt when he said the word Berdache. Without waiting for a response, he turned and stalked off.

Chayton put Moon off his lap. "My apologies for Dyami's words, Berdache. He is one of those who cry for war. Nothing will soothe him." His tone was conciliatory at the insult done to Lizard. "All do not wish for war, Berdache. We will listen to your words, and hope peace may be restored."

He stood reluctantly, and bent to caress Moon's cheek. "I will give your mother much joy when I tell her of your life now."

Lizard stood and Red Wolf moved to stand behind him as guard. "Then we will go and make peace, so you may return quickly."

They walked together, with Moon following sedately in the men's wake. She took her place among the women, serving corn cakes and honey to Lizard and Red Wolf before seating herself behind them, ready to serve if they needed anything.

Lizard noted that many relaxed and were more friendly to see Chayton walking with him, and at ease. It was a good omen. When all finished their food, they wiped their mouths politely and many leaned forward with eagerness.

He folded his arms and assumed the mantle of authority. "The island is both Chickasaw and Choctaw. Just as our ancestors came from two brothers, so the island shares ancestry with both. We should honor our ancestors. Let the island be a symbol of brotherhood and a place of sharing. Let there be a gathering every year when the leaves turn, where our warriors may prove their prowess and gain honor. Let there be trade and feasting, where our young may find suitable mates. As brothers, we will all share."

He scanned the faces seated around the gathering place. The warriors did not show emotion, but there was no overt hostility. Most were relaxed and some even unbent enough to nod.

"We will use the white or black pebbles. White for peace, and black for war." At his declaration, one of the Choctaw warriors brought two baskets. The warrior placed the first ceremoniously in front of Lizard, and the other he carried to all men present, giving them one black pebble, and one white. Then Lizard blessed the empty basket and passed it around.

No sound but the quiet chinks as each man made his choice by dropping a pebble in the hole at the top disturbed the solemnity of the vote. When the heavy basket returned to Lizard, he opened the covering and looked inside. Knowing the value of suspense, he made no move or gesture that indicated the outcome of the vote. All men held their breath as he dumped the contents on the ground in front of him.

The mound of white gleamed in the sun.

The entire assembly roared, and even stone-faced warriors cheered and smiled. Lizard spread the pebbles for all to see, and only a few black pebbles stood in stark contrast to the overwhelming vote for peace.

The celebrations and talks deciding on the details of the *pau-wau* went on well into the night. All manner of fish and game were cooked and eaten. A great fire

crackled in the center of the gathering place and the young danced around the flames joyously.

Lizard longed to abandon his dignity and dance. He wanted with all his heart to pull Red Wolf from his stance as guard, and fling them both wildly into the young ones who stamped and flirted. Moon danced by, her braids flying, with her father laughing behind her.

His heart ached for his quiet home, where he could be only Lizard instead of the dignified and wise Berdache. He wanted nothing more than to sleep peacefully with Red Wolf and Moon in his lodge, taking them on spirit journeys.

Finally, late in the night when the bonfire was ash and embers, the details were decided. The village chiefs drew straws, and the Chickasaw would host in the fall. The next year, the Choctaw would take their turn. Runners would go to all the smaller villages, announcing the event.

Lizard wanted to bow his head in weariness. Instead, he forced a genial smile on his face. "I am not needed now, and it is a long journey home. We will go in the morning." He rose, and with Red Wolf following silently behind, he made his way to his pallet. He got at least part of his wish. He slept in Red Wolf's arms.

* * *

The whole village and guests turned out to wish them well as they began their long walk home. Chayton hugged his daughter fiercely and walked with them for a few minutes before turning back reluctantly. Red Wolf took the lead, as usual, but this time he scanned the forest more carefully.

Lizard seemed to notice his heightened alertness. He walked quickly until he caught up with Red Wolf, and whispered, "You seem to be even more on your guard, Red Wolf. Why?"

Reluctant to discuss his unease, Red Wolf decided to tell Lizard what he had learned while Lizard discussed the *pau-wau*. He beckoned to Moon, and they stopped for a moment.

Red Wolf spoke in the soft tone a warrior used when his voice must not carry into the forest. "The warrior Dyami who insulted you yesterday morning did not dance at the feast last night. His anger was great that there would be no war. The words he spoke to others said that he blamed you and might seek vengeance, to start a war deliberately."

Lizard nodded. "It is expected that some will be angered. I will hope that Dyami uses his mouth, and not his bow."

Moon shook her head. "I do not know Dyami well, but he is quick to anger and very proud. You are right to be cautious." She shrugged and moved back to stand behind Lizard, once more becoming the meek woman.

They fell back in line, but Lizard's hand now carried his knife under his cape, and Red Wolf nodded approval.

They walked until they came to a small stream they all could easily jump without getting their feet wet. Red Wolf leapt first, but before Lizard could make his attempt, the sound Red Wolf feared sang from the bushes. He congratulated Dyami on his choice of a perfect spot to ambush them, even as the arrow penetrated his shoulder, the shot aimed perfectly to make him unable to return fire. He dropped his bow and fell backwards, his chagrin at being caught greater than the pain in his body.

Lizard wheeled, knife in hand, but the next arrow struck him. Because he had turned, the arrow hit lower, but still he went down and lay still.

Fear and sorrow twisted through Red Wolf's gut, but a swift movement caught his eye. Moon dropped her packs and rolled with practiced movements, making herself a difficult target. At the end of her roll, she leapt like a deer over the stream and rolled again, this time taking Red Wolf's bow and two arrows that had fallen from his quiver. At the end of her roll, she came up with an arrow notched and pulled the warrior's bow as if it were a toy. The other arrow, amazingly, was clenched in her teeth. Where had she learned a warrior's tricks?

Her arrow hissed into the bushes, and Red Wolf heard a cry of pain.

Without pausing, Moon rolled again, succeeding in finding the safety of the bushes at the side of the trail. Despite his pain, Red Wolf was stunned into silence and awe. She was as good as a junior warrior!

A stick snapped somewhere in the bushes where Moon disappeared, but this mistake was acceptable for a woman who had lived as a slave for two winters. She still did what any young warrior would do -- circled around as silently as possible, in case their attacker was wounded, but possibly able to fight.

Red Wolf attempted to move, and the pain in his shoulder was so excruciating, he saw bright lights and nearly passed out. He turned his head instead, looking at Lizard's still form on the other side of the stream. The cape Lizard wore prevented him from seeing if his dearest friend lived.

Moon popped out of the bushes near the place where the arrows had come, her arrow notched and ready. Perhaps it was a good thing Red Wolf did not understand the Chickasaw tongue well, because what he did understand was a fierce peppering of curses, and an angry, "Why? Why did you do this?"

He could not hear the answer, but Moon lowered the bow, and bent over. "Your honor? Take this in to the next world, Dyami. You die by a woman's hand. There is no honor in ambushing a Berdache who cannot harm you," she snarled.

Lizard's soft voice, laced with pain, came to Red Wolf's ears. "One forgets how fierce Otter can be when angered." His chuckle ended with a gasp.

A man's voice, weaker but angry, answered her. Red Wolf could not see anything more than Moon's head and shoulders, because of the thick bushes.

She snorted her contempt. Moon bent once more, and when next she raised her hand, she held a warrior's scalp lock high in the same hand that wielded the knife. "You will answer to the spirits without even the honor of your scalp lock, Dyami. I count coup against you." The scalp lock went to her belt, and then the knife flashed as it came down once more. She stood again, the knife bloody, and she held two bows and a quiver of arrows.

Without looking back, Moon stepped out of the bushes with her chin high. With her woman's dress and leggings, she should have looked very odd. Yet, there was something natural and even beautiful about her proud swagger and coolly unconcerned features. No woman of the Choctaw, faced with such a situation, would have reacted with any less bravery than she. Red Wolf's heart swelled with pride that she had done so well.

Properly, she went to Lizard first, but he attempted to sit upright with a groan. She helped him pull the arrow from his flesh.

After appraising Lizard carefully, she nodded. "You will live, Berdache." She helped him sit up, and took his pack from his back.

"I know it." Lizard handed her the bloody arrow that injured him. "It only pierced the skin of my side. Have an arrow for your quiver."

Red Wolf closed his eyes, grateful that Lizard was in no danger. The same could not be said for himself. He felt the hot wetness of blood soaking his shirt and the ground beneath him. Moreover, he knew what had to be done, and it would not be pleasant.

Moon rummaged in Lizard's pack, and laid out the bags of herbs. The pain roared in Red Wolf's ears, so he could not hear their words, only quiet murmurs while they made a bundle of healing herbs for his shoulder.

The smell of his own blood filled Red Wolf's nose, and he felt himself growing weak. He sighed and gathered his pride like a cloak.

When next he opened his eyes, Moon came and showed him the bundle of soft woven cloth. "You know what must be done, Red Wolf," she said, her voice like that of a mother comforting a child.

"I know it." He nodded his understanding. "Before you do what you must, tell me this. How did you know what to do? You used a warrior's bow."

She caressed his cheek. "I trained as a warrior, and lost a battle in a raid on a Choctaw village some three days toward the setting sun from here." She grinned. "They

thought I was a boy, until my wounds needed tending. That is how I came to be in the slaves' lodge instead of dead. Someday when you are better, I will tell you of it."

He braced himself when she reached for the arrow.

"Enjoy your trip to the spirit world." She gave the arrow one hard pull with one hand, her other poised to slap the bundle on his wound.

The agony keened, and Red Wolf gratefully lost consciousness.

Chapter Nine

Lizard pulled the wrapping bands off Red Wolf's shoulder and ignored the warrior's grunt of pain. He lifted the herb bundle, the third he'd made since they'd stumbled into their home village a moon before, bearing a fevered Red Wolf on a makeshift travois. "You are much improved, Red Wolf, and your body is no longer weak."

His beloved patient and student sat upright and silent. His eyes were closed, and he only winced occasionally while Lizard washed off the old, dried blood. "I feel stronger, Lizard. I look forward to sleeping beside you both instead of on this invalid's pallet. Moon hunts alone, and I am anxious to join her." He opened his eyes and smiled.

"Moon has returned with our dinner." The woman who stepped through the door bore no resemblance to the cowed slave. Her loincloth was as skimpy as a man's, showing off her strong thighs and long legs. With the heat of the day, she wore only a vest to cover her chest, displaying her lush curves. No longer the skinny slave, she was fit and well fed.

She dropped two fat rabbits beside the door flap and hung her bow and quiver on the peg Lizard had pounded into the wattle and daub lodge wall for her. She sauntered over to give both her lovers a caress. "I am happy to hear you wish to hunt with me, Red Wolf."

Lizard moved aside to let her examine Red Wolf's shoulder, and took advantage of her distraction to caress her bare buttocks. Moon did not appear to notice his hand, or Red Wolf's eyes lingering down her vest. She did, however, playfully slap at Red Wolf's wrist when his hand on his uninjured side crept up to play with a breast.

"You get no release until you have taken your spirit journey tonight, Red Wolf." She delivered the admonishment with a smile and a finger flick to his nose. Evading

Lizard's hand, she laughed. "It will not be my fault if you go to the spirits tonight with hard stalks."

Lizard sighed and watched her take the rabbits outside to skin and prepare them. "She is right. Soon I will make the Black Drink, and we will be too miserable to notice."

"What has happened to us, Lizard? You prefer men. I am happy with you, and, while I find pleasure with her, I prefer you as my partner. Yet, lately she stirs me." He gestured to his half-hardened *chodis*. "I feel as if my *dowsetts* will burst."

The sight of Red Wolf's hardness was enough to make Lizard's mouth water. He forced himself to calm. "What we must do to train you causes our natural connection to the animal spirits to increase. We are more like our totems. Wolf wishes a mate and family. Deer sees a strong doe." He moved aside his loincloth to show that he too suffered, and then covered his aching stalk.

"Will this pressure ease after tonight, when you and I walk together in the spirit world?" Red Wolf's eyes were half-lidded with restrained lust.

"It will depend on what the spirits say to you." Lizard folded his arms, and looked off into a distant place only he could see. "I always return peaceful and calm. But my father often would awaken and tear my mother's clothes to get to her when they thought I was asleep."

Pondering this, Red Wolf rubbed his shoulder above the ugly wound. "I half-wish we will awaken like your father. I ache with need to have you both beneath me."

That image made Lizard's hardness increase, and he groaned. "Forgive me, my friend, but I wish to have you under me, with Moon to serve as well." He blew out a breath. "We are making it worse for ourselves."

"Then mix the Black Drink. Moon will make a stew to keep warm while she watches over us. I hunger, in more ways than one." Red Wolf rubbed the skin on his belly as if it itched.

Lizard had been waiting for that sign of restlessness, as if the skin over Red Wolf's bones no longer fit so well. It was the final signal that Red Wolf's spirit was now uncomfortable in his body, and it was time to make it wish to leave on its journey.

Often a spirit had to be forced out of its home with drugs, so Lizard was grateful he would not resort to such measures.

Both men had not eaten for three days, and the Black Drink's effects would require the final step when done -- a bath in the stream. Then, with Moon standing guard to see they were not disturbed, they would go on the long, dangerous journey, with Lizard acting as guide. No more was permitted of him. Red Wolf must stand alone and face all. He was strong enough now, and recovered from the fever of his shoulder wound.

He was resigned to watching his friend prove his worth to the spirits. "Go tell Moon we are ready to go into the trees, and to watch for our return. We will be as weak as new fawns when we are done."

He turned to go to his herb pots, and waited until Red Wolf had left. The pot had been steeping with the foul brew for three days in its hiding place. Lizard shuddered, and poured the dark liquid into a cooking pot and set it near the fire to warm. The irony that he prepared to literally torture himself was not lost on him.

Only for Red Wolf would he live through this horror again. The hunger pangs had eased only this morning. He blessed sweet Moon for leaving them to their agonies and going to live with the Wise Woman until this morning, returning today as requested. She did not need to hear the men she cared for growling like angry dogs while they suffered. Even Grub had fled with Moon while his men-friends purged their bodies.

The stench of the Black Drink filled the air of the lodge. Red Wolf entered and sneezed. "That is truly foul to smell! We must drink this?"

Lizard's eyes were watering, but he nodded in answer to the complaint.

Moon, who had followed Red Wolf in, took one sniff and fled gagging back outside. Lizard didn't blame her. He poured two cups of the foul brew, and took the pot with him as they left the lodge to air out. "We will go to the woods to drink. The effects are quick, and as bad as the smell. I will dispose of the rest away from the village. The smell goes away as it cools."

Red Wolf picked up the two drinking vessels and held them as far away from his nose as possible. "Then let them cool quickly!"

They made their way out of the village, avoiding all contact with other people. Once safely in the deepest part of the wood, they placed the cups and pot on a convenient stump and divested themselves of their clothing.

Lizard had chosen this place carefully. The stream gurgled just out of sight. A log nearby overlooked a small pit, probably the tree that had once joined with the stump. Thick brush concealed the place, giving them privacy. To ensure they were undisturbed, Lizard took their clothes and hung them on the bushes surrounding the small clearing. He nodded in satisfaction. "All is ready."

With resignation warring with determination, Red Wolf picked up both cups and politely handed one to Lizard. Their fingers touched briefly, and Red Wolf's troubled gaze looked into Lizard's face. "I know what you sacrifice for me, Lizard. I am grateful that you give up your dignity for me."

Touched, Lizard caressed the fingers that clenched Red Wolf's cup so tightly. "You give up your pride to do this. I love you more for your bravery. We both sacrifice this day." With that, he downed the foul brew in one gulping swallow.

Gagging sounds told him Red Wolf followed his lead. The cups made it to the stump before the pains began. Both men fell to their knees simultaneously to clutch their stomachs and writhe in agony while their digestive systems emptied themselves by any means possible.

* * *

The moon was up before Red Wolf summoned the strength to crawl toward the stream to wash the filth from his labored body. A rustling behind told him Lizard made his way also toward the cleansing water.

He welcomed the chance to leave his body behind. Already he was not sure if he was in the place between the worlds or not. No, he had to still be in his skin. He ached in a thousand places. Still, the grass seemed to breathe and sigh, and the water of the stream laughed at him as he slid gratefully into it face-first.

He came up to breathe in time to see a disheveled Lizard crawl naked and filthy into the water. Though Lizard had bound and braided his long hair before they began, it now looked as if he'd been in a horrible fight with a wildcat and lost. Only Lizard's beatific expression was out of place. Perhaps a practiced Berdache slid more easily into the spirit world.

The shock of the cold water helped Red Wolf regain his hold on this world. The cleansing sands were waiting, and he scrubbed until his skin was raw, but clean. Then he cleaned Lizard's back, and his lover performed the same service to Red Wolf's. The soon-to-be-ex-warrior sighed in relief.

"I am ready, Lizard." His voice sounded hollow like an old log when he spoke.

They helped each other from the water, took their cloaks to cover them from the night's chill, and staggered back to the village where Moon watched from the front of the lodge.

Wordlessly, Moon inserted herself between them and put her arms around both men, helping them walk the last few steps. Red Wolf now felt nothing toward her, just as Lizard promised. All he wanted was the pallet prepared for him earlier by Moon. He pushed through the door flap and fell on his bed near the fire with a sigh of relief.

Lizard made his way to his pallet with more grace, and elected to sit up. He threw herbs into the fire, and murmured words of protection and blessing. Red Wolf felt a powdery substance being sprinkled over his body, and smelled tobacco. He looked up into Moon's soft eyes and nodded his thanks for the protections. Then, he closed his eyes and slipped peacefully into the place between worlds.

As promised, the meadow was now a verdant green, and the sun shone down like a blessing from the Maker. Yes, he was naked, but he no longer feared to be without his weapons. His friends here were his protection, and he needed nothing more.

Lizard would appear in his own good time, but Red Wolf saw no reason not to visit Grandmother Spider at the edge of the meadow, if she chose to appear. He wished to give thanks to her for her lessons. The wind caressed his face and played with his hair as he stepped over to where the spider sat in her web.

“Ah, it is my newest Berdache,” the aged voice chuckled. “Stretch forth your hand, Red Wolf.”

He did as commanded, and was amazed and gratified to see the great black spider crawl on his hand, up his arm, and sit on his shoulder. “Greetings, Grandmother.”

“Greetings. Your love will be along soon, Red Wolf. I look forward to teaching you.” One leg caressed his neck, sending shivers down his spine.

The greatest gift of Grandmother Spider was that of storytelling. Red Wolf grinned. “I look forward to the lessons, Grandmother.”

“Good. When you are old and gray, you will tell stories to the People. Stories I will teach you. Things that have not needed telling before now.” The crackling voice seemed pleased with his answers.

“I am not old yet, Grandmother. Have you something for me to do now, while my body is young?” Red Wolf knew it took many years to develop the art of telling a good tale, so he hoped for another duty until then.

“Peace, yes!” Her laughter scraped across his ears. “Let me go back to my web. Here comes Lizard. There will be others to tell you of this.” She crawled back down his arm and thence to her web. “Before you ask, yes, we call him Lizard. It is his true name, as well as another you may not hear. It is the name of his heart, for it is not what you are called, but what you choose to answer to that marks you.”

Lizard approached, as naked as Red Wolf, and as seemingly uncaring. “Greetings, Grandmother.” He bowed and smiled at the big black spider.

“And greetings to you, my fine young Berdache. I’ve had my little speech with Red Wolf. It is time for you to listen to Brother Bear.” One delicate black leg waved, pointing behind them.

The great black bear lumbered up, and bowed to the spider before turning to the two men who waited respectfully for him. “Why don’t we go sit under that tree?” he suggested, his large wet nose dipping toward a spreading oak.

He made himself comfortable and waited for the men to arrange themselves before him. "I have waited for Red Wolf to join you, Lizard. Together, you will do what no other one Berdache has done. The three of you will mend the long discord between the Choctaw and the Chickasaw." He heard their intakes of breath.

"The three of us, Brother Bear?" Red Wolf asked politely. This was his dream journey. It was up to him to interact with the spirit animals.

A chuckling bark sounded nearby, and Wolf paced in to sit by Bear. "Of course, Red Wolf. Never before have we allowed three Berdaches to be born at once. It is necessary to create a family like yours."

Red Wolf's eyes flew open. "Moon is a Berdache as well?"

Bear nodded. "Yes. We could not break the pairing of your soul and Lizard's. That would be wrong, since the Maker created you thus. You are as two halves of the same being."

Red Wolf reached out to hold Lizard's hand. This explained why they shared so much between them. The Maker had bonded them. Such things were unbreakable.

"But we needed a female," Wolf broke in. "So, we took a small portion of the female essence that lived in you both and made Moon. She will provide the one thing you both cannot do by yourselves -- children of both Berdaches. Children who will be Chickasaw and Choctaw. This is the reason she loves you both and cannot choose between you."

Bear, the lawgiver and peacemaker, continued. "Moon may, as a woman, move where you cannot. She will speak to the Wise Women, and tell stories to the mothers. The women will teach the children, and influence the men toward peace." Bear wheezed a laugh. "A Berdache's word is law, but a man who listens to his wife knows more peace."

"We must change the habit of many moons. The Chickasaw and the Choctaw have learned to hate as a habit. They look to war not as a last option, but as the first thought. It saddens us, the spirits, to see brother fight brother."

“We have a reason for this,” Wolf put in. “Look into my eyes, Red Wolf. Look and see the future if brother continues to kill brother.”

Red Wolf leaned forward until he could only see the great yellow eyes of Wolf. The meadow vanished. He flew as an eagle did, over the lands of the Choctaw and Chickasaw. Everywhere he looked, villages were abandoned. In what few places where the People lived, many lay sick or starving because they were too weak to hunt. The air was foul with the stench of death and disease. Then, they were all gone. The villages vanished, and the land was empty.

Abruptly, he was back on his rump in the grass of the meadow. He gasped for air, horrified. Beside him, Lizard wept silent tears, and spoke. “This must not happen.”

Wolf and Bear rose. “Then go, and speak softly of peace to all the People. Live and love, and bring your children to us when the time comes.”

Without warning, they were flung back into the world of humankind, with the vision of what would happen if they failed burned into their hearts.

Chapter Ten

Red Wolf leaned against the central pole of their lodge, still exhausted from his ordeal. "Lizard, do you wish to add words to what I have told Moon?" He felt as if he had been beaten with clubs, even after food and rest. Grub sat between himself and Lizard, taking scratches and pats from both.

Lizard shook his head. "You have told all, and better than I could."

Moon put her chin in her hands and frowned. "So, we three are all pieces of the same spirit?"

"No, Moon." Lizard leaned forward. "Red Wolf and I are bonded by the Maker, but still two separate spirits. You are a new spirit, created from both of us."

Her frown deepened and there was even a hint of a pout. "I prefer to think that I am a whole person. I do not like this. We have no choice. It angers me to feel caged."

Red Wolf raised an eyebrow. "You stayed captive as a slave for two years." The irony was not lost on him that Moon fought the plan the spirits had for her, but stayed where men put her.

"Hah!" She tossed her braid and gave Red Wolf a half-smile. "I stayed because it pleased me to do so. If I had left the slaves' lodge, it would have been a long journey home, with warriors hunting me like a rabbit. Weapons, I could have taken from any warrior's lodge while he slept, so I would not go hungry. I like the people of the Choctaw. I like sex. If I had gone home to my village, I would have been pressured to marry. You saw my father's hope that Red Wolf would be my husband." She made a face.

Her statement hurt, and Red Wolf sat up, stung. "I am a good husband!"

She shook a finger at him. "Yes, you are. Too good, for me. Why do you think my father had hopes for you, and not for Lizard, who holds higher honor?"

Lizard chuckled. "Because he saw a strong warrior in Red Wolf. One who might tame your wild spirit."

Moon crossed her arms and nodded. "Just so and so. Red Wolf is too perfect. He is handsome, controlled as only a warrior is, and," her eyes turned wicked, "his body is built for the pleasures of the pallet." She grinned at Lizard. "As we both well know."

Too perfect? Was it possible to be too perfect? Red Wolf's jaw slowly fell open at this frank assessment of his attributes. He fell back on the one thing he could say anything about. "Chayton is wrong. I would not change you. I want to hunt and fish with you. I like to sport on the pallet with you, it is true. But I don't need or want a meek woman."

She kept her arms crossed. "Chayton is wrong about Lizard, too. He thought Lizard would let me be like a wild creature, untamed." Her lips quirked into a wry smile. "Lizard is wildest of us all."

Red Wolf saw the humor of it after a moment, and took the opportunity to tease Lizard. "The great Berdache must remain free to be untamed."

He ducked the stick Lizard tossed at him and laughed.

"These words we make are foolish." Lizard folded his own arms. "It does not matter what Chayton thinks. It matters what we think. Moon is right. We must make the choice to be all three Berdache. We must decide how we will do what the spirits ask of us." He looked at his two friends, his face serious. "I chose long ago to do as the spirits asked. Now you must decide."

Confusion warred in Red Wolf. "I do not understand what they ask of us. How can I decide when I do not know the question?"

Shaking her head, Moon snorted. "Even I, who was not there, understand what they wish of you, Red Wolf. You will be the secret Berdache. The one who guards Lizard. There will be those who do not wish for peace, and will seek to harm Lizard. All know Lizard, and look to him. He is even more beautiful than you. Who will notice you, his warrior guard?"

Lizard leaned forward. "Who will notice the Wise Woman who travels with us? I have two secret Berdache to guard my back, and to be my eyes and ears where I cannot go. The common warrior does not speak to me. The women do not speak to me. I sit among the war chiefs and village chiefs and listen to their words. I cannot hear the others where I sit."

"But we can. Yes. While I nurse our children, I will sit among the women. They will not know I hunt in the forest with Red Wolf. They will not know I am more than a Wise Woman." She grinned at them both, and took their hands. "I have decided. I will be mother to your children. It does not matter whose seed gives me the child. I will be your guard, your ears, your mouth, and your eyes among the women. I can do what you cannot. That is a task I will enjoy."

Red Wolf snorted softly to himself. Once again, Moon had confused them, and then challenged them. She was more than a woman, who lived for things he did not understand.

He looked at Lizard, who waited with patience for Red Wolf's choice, ready to war alone against their vision, if he must. He would be the one in greatest danger, sitting out in the village gathering places, an easy target for arrows from angry warriors who did not see past their own pride. Red Wolf did not pretend to understand that much bravery.

Nevertheless, he could not turn away from the challenge. His words felt like a vow even more sacred than marriage. "I will be your eyes when you are in danger. I will be your ears where you cannot hear, and your mouth where you cannot speak." He took Lizard's hand. "I will bleed for you and guard you, that you remain safe." He looked at Moon. "If the spirits will it, I will give you children, so that we may pass on our task until the spirits say the danger is past."

Lizard squeezed their hands. "I will be the one they see, the one they hear. I will put my body in the village gathering place and be the distraction, so that you may work in peace." He turned to Moon. "If the spirits are willing I, too, will give you children."

Red Wolf felt as if the world suddenly shook, and his skin shivered. From the stunned looks on his friends' faces, they too felt the power move. He was bathed in sunlight, even though they remained in the shadow of the lodge. The feeling racing through his body was many times more pleasurable than sexual release, and he reveled in it. The power surged between their clasped hands.

He saw the spirits come. Grub changed and became Dog, Lizard's bearskin cape moved and became Bear. The feathered cape on its peg shook once, and out of it came both Deer and Eagle. His wolf pelt shivered and became Wolf. Otter sprang forth from Moon's necklace. Other spirits came from the forest and sky, crowding into the lodge until it was full. Even Butterfly, the symbol of womanhood, flitted in to land on Moon's head.

A spider crawled from the shadows of the roof, and became an old woman wreathed in black. She smiled. "We thank you for your choices." She turned to Moon. "Never do we order destiny, for the way a person lives their life is their own choice, woven of a thousand decisions made every day. Your freedom is always your own."

Next, she pinned Lizard with her gaze. "You live a life of sacrifice and patience. Learn to be less so. You weave mats to walk upon, but you must not become one."

Red Wolf took his turn under her stare with all the bravery he expected of himself. "Yours is perhaps the most challenging of tasks. You will be the sinew that binds this lodge into a fighting band. One Berdache cannot win this war, because this war will not end. It is in the nature of all men to give things names, and try to order others' lives. But true brotherhood does not see the body in which the spirit resides, nor does the love that goes with it demand one be different than what the Maker made him."

She encompassed them all with a fierce look. "Teach this lesson to all your children, and to their children. I will depend upon the People someday to teach the meaning of brotherhood to all, no matter what their bodies look like, no matter what language they use to call the Maker, or how they choose to live their lives. Only the Maker has the right to judge if they have lived wisely and well. Learn this, and your

children will teach all men this simple truth." Then, she and the animal spirits were gone.

The three Berdaches sat in silence until Moon cleared her throat. "We have much to do. It takes nine moons to make a baby." She opened her arms to both men. "I'm sure we can begin now, can we not?"

The powers that had surged through them all when the spirits visited had revived Red Wolf's flagging energy. He felt as joyful as a child, and grinned like a boy given an entire comb of honey to himself. "We must obey the spirits," he laughed.

"Indeed we must." Lizard nodded his agreement, his eyes gleaming. "But we must be gentle with our precious Moon, Red Wolf. She has not had the pleasures of the flesh since the peace talks."

Moon, her mouth smiling even as her jaw dropped, put her hands on her hips. "I am no fragile flower! I insist -- no demand! -- the joy of both of you. Simultaneously."

Her vest parted with her arms akimbo, displaying more of her curves. Her loincloth had slipped to well below her belly, teasing Red Wolf's eyes. He felt the lust flare like a dried pinecone in their lodge fire pit. He stood casually, ignoring how his stalk rose in salute to Moon's unique beauty. Then, he tackled her, forcing her back on the pounded dirt of the lodge.

"You demand, do you? Are you sure?" His teasing growl was worthy of his namesake. "What would you do if we ripped the clothes from your body and made use of it completely?"

Her eyes were bright and fearless. "Trip you and beat you to the floor. Squirm, claw, and bite. Not out of fear, but desire. And when you both are spent, I will still demand more."

"Oh-ho!" Lizard chortled. "Our meek maiden has turned into a warrior woman. She has challenged us, Red Wolf, to best her."

Lizard closed their lodge door flap, signaling he was unavailable, and moved to stand above where Red Wolf held Moon down. He drew his knife and slit the clothing from their bodies, daring Moon to protest.

Her mock struggles amused Red Wolf. "A warrior woman she is. We are all warriors in a battle no one else can see." He winked at Lizard. "Why are you always the last one who remains clothed?"

"Because I like to watch people." Lizard removed his own loincloth and tossed it away. "I remind you that is a particularly fine body you display, Red Wolf."

The caress to his buttocks that followed made Red Wolf take a deep breath. "We have a different purpose, tonight. This night, it is for Moon's pleasure."

Moon gaped at him and stopped her playful struggles.

"True, Red Wolf." Lizard looked down at Moon. "We must both have her tonight." He knelt on one side. "Move over and share."

Lizard's hand clamped down on Moon's arm, allowing Red Wolf to lay full length next to her without releasing the arm in his possession. Lizard bent to suckle on the breast closest to him, and Red Wolf followed suit.

"Have I no say in this?" Moon's protest was breathless and weak.

Both men lifted their heads and looked at one another. Red Wolf returned to lavishing attention to the nipple hardening beneath his tongue.

"But I thought you already said you wished this, Moon." Lizard's eyes twinkled, and he returned to his work without waiting for an answer.

Moaning, Moon began to writhe beneath their ministrations. "I do."

"Then let us pleasure you," both men murmured in unison.

"I'm surrounded!" she laughed.

Red Wolf could not resist the warrior's joke. "You are not surrounded. You are in a place full of targets. Fire your bow at will." He released her arm to see what she would do.

Moon reached immediately for his *chodis*. "I am the target, and here is your weapon. You both must fire the bow. True?" She spread her knees in invitation.

"We both will," Lizard answered. "I will give Red Wolf the first attempt, this night. He has proven before that his aim is true." He sat back, as if giving Red Wolf room.

“Why can you both not do this at the same time? I have always been curious if I can stretch that far.”

Now it was Red Wolf’s turn to gape in astonishment. “Both?”

“Both!” She jerked her chin emphatically. “I have thought of this while a slave. I would like to feel you both enter me at once, and rub together. Two sticks rubbing together to create fire.”

Red Wolf felt his own fires burn hotter at the thought. His gaze met Lizard’s glittering one. “I am eager to try this.”

Lizard shut his opened mouth. “And I. Tell us what you have envisioned.”

“On your back, Red Wolf, please.”

Red Wolf obeyed her command with amusement. “I obey the warrior woman.”

Moon laughed. “You? Obey me? I think not. You are eager to try a new path.”

She waited until Red Wolf was settled comfortably, then climbed on his stomach, allowing his hard stalk to find its way in only a little.

“Now for Lizard to join you,” she commanded. She looked over her shoulder at Lizard’s puzzled face.

“But Moon, how will Red Wolf and I thrust within you?” He looked a little sheepish, but eager.

“You will not move. I will.” She tossed her braid with calm assurance.

Both men looked dubious.

After a few minutes, Lizard shrugged. “I will trust you. Do I need the bear grease?”

Her disgusted gasp was all the answer he needed, but she exclaimed, “You are not putting that inside me! I wish to smell like a woman, not a dead bear!”

Lizard chuckled, and knelt behind Moon and between Red Wolf’s legs. He had little room to maneuver, Red Wolf guessed, but a few moments later, Moon grunted and winced. Red Wolf felt Lizard’s hardness slide slowly in, caressing gently. It was incredibly crowded, but pleasurable beyond words.

“Spirits, I’m grateful we don’t have to move.” Lizard’s face was contorted with concentration over Moon’s shoulder. He settled his hands down near Red Wolf’s elbows and braced himself there.

Moon only managed a long, drawn-in breath. Her eyes were half-closed. She backed up slightly, bringing them both into her body with great care.

All three groaned. Red Wolf shuddered with pleasure, sending shock waves through his friends. Moon began to rock back and forth, at first moving slowly. Then, as her body adjusted to the strain and moistened, she moved more quickly.

The sliding pressure was amazing, and knowing he shared this wondrous sensation with Lizard fired Red Wolf’s passion. He fought the need to buck and claim Moon for his own with hard thrusts.

Perhaps Lizard felt the same, for his face was not serene now, but fierce with concentration.

Moon’s body provided more slickness than the bear grease could possibly have done, and silently Red Wolf approved of her decision. Still, this incredible tightness would not allow him to last long, and Moon must cry out her pleasure to ensure pregnancy. His honor demanded this as well. He reached up with one hand to play with one of her breasts caressing his chest. He untangled the other hand to tweak Lizard’s hard brown nipple.

Two gasps rewarded his efforts, and Moon’s eyes shut completely. “Yes, Red Wolf. Please do that more,” she begged. Her body moved even faster, her breaths came in short pants.

Lizard, too, seemed greatly appreciative, though his doe-brown eyes were shut and his lips parted to breathe in time with Moon’s gasps.

Red Wolf felt his berries move within his body. “I cannot last!” He tweaked Moon’s nipple harder, and felt her body clench around the two stalks within.

Moon gritted her teeth. “Nor I!” She was suddenly still, and then Red Wolf felt her ecstasy as he had never felt a woman’s before. Moon’s cries filled his ears, and the

pulsing of her body was more than Red Wolf could tolerate. He felt himself release with no control, and Lizard's groans accompanied his own.

Lizard's body moved as if he had no control of it, in the short thrusts that always signaled his release. The caressing movements only made Red Wolf spill his joy deeper into Moon, and her incoherent cries told both the men there had been success.

For long moments, none could move beyond uncontrolled shudders. Moon's body collapsed atop Red Wolf's chest, where she lay panting as if she had run many hours. Her body still clenched and released, drawing every drop from them both.

Lizard's arms seemed locked in a rigid position. He gasped out, "Never have I known this much pleasure." He fought for breath, his voice rasping. His body remained rigid, but Red Wolf felt both of them softening within Moon. Lizard removed himself first.

Moon groaned, then moved away from Red Wolf's body, falling to the side. "I will be sore, but I have never been happier." She sighed contentedly, and snuggled into Red Wolf's arms.

Red Wolf concentrated on slowing his breathing, but smiled warmly and opened his other arm to Lizard. "I too have never felt such joy in my heart. I love you both, yet I feel no division within me."

He settled himself more comfortably as Lizard, still panting slightly, joined them. Lizard reached across Red Wolf's belly to clasp Moon's hand. "Our hearts are not halved. The joy is doubled because we love twice," Lizard replied sleepily.

Moon yawned. "Soon, there will be more to love."

Perhaps Moon's quiet assurance was the reason Red Wolf slipped back into the place between worlds so easily. Or, maybe it was that he had visited so recently the path was clear to him. It did not matter. This time, the spirits were not visible. Instead, a rustling in the grass caught his attention. He saw nothing, but when he walked toward it, the sound moved off.

He took this as a signal to follow, and soon found himself at a still pond of great beauty. It was so lovely, he stopped to admire the mists swirling above it, even though the day was sunny and bright.

Under his regard, the mists moved with purpose, and figures appeared. Moon danced in the air, her belly swollen, and two children danced with her. The little girl had the soft eyes of a doe, like Lizard's, and the little boy of the same age bore Red Wolf's own hawk face. The twins, for that was surely what they were, halted as one for a moment and waved to Red Wolf before returning to the joyful stomping around a great fire.

Red Wolf sat upon a boulder and watched the celebration, and was content.

Lena Austin

Lena Austin is a “fallen” society wench with a checkered past. She’s been a licensed minister, hairdresser, Realtor, radio DJ, exotic dancer, telephone service tech, live-steel medievalist swordswoman, BDSM Mistress, and investment property manager. Not necessarily in that order. She never finished that degree in archaeology, but did learn to scuba. After a life like that, gardening is pretty restful. Of herself, Lena writes, “I’m tall, presently red-haired, and I look like an unholy mating between an Amazon and a librarian.”