

This Chapter was cut from the book prior to copy editing at the suggestion of beta readers, because they thought it was a distraction from the main storyline, although I always liked this short chapter.

The Past and the Future (Deleted and unedited)

The messengers came in from the northwest and waded across the stream, near where it came from the forest. The two men had traveled for more than a moon and bore a basket of gifts from the People of the Great Water. The gifts consisted of dried fish and an elaborate necklace made from shells. These were arranged in a clever way that formed a pattern—an image that changed depending on how he looked at it. The likeness reminded Great Storm of the enormous waterfall he had seen in his youth—the year he had stayed with his kin to the north. During his year as a visitor, he and his friend Red Stag had traveled far to the distant north to see ‘The Waters That Fall Forever’. The gift was also a reminder of the bond between Red Stag, the Chief Elder of the lake people, and himself. Great Storm had mated with a girl from that village and brought her back home.

The Chief Elder sat in his lodge alone, pondering the significance of the gift after the messengers had taken their leave to rest. The necklace alone was a treasure. Its design and making must have taken a highly skilled artist several moons to make—it represented enormous wealth, and was not given lightly. Sending two hunters to carry the message meant two moons of travel. The loss of the wealth they could have brought to their home was an even more significant investment. Red Stag wouldn’t have done this without expecting something of even more value in return.

Before the evening meal, Great Storm asked the higher-ranked messenger, Fighting Badger, to meet with him again, alone this time. He needed to find out what Red Stag wanted. Great Storm sat uneasily on a thick pile of skins. Arthritis in his knees had flared up this week and he needed more support than normal, but his back was as straight as ever and his gaze held the same power that had always

instilled the respect and obedience of other men, even when he had been a young hunter.

Fighting Badger seated himself in an almost-equal position. He was representing his village, not himself, but he waited for the Elder to begin. The hunter from the north guessed the question that must be on the old man's mind, but as the one reaching out, tradition and politeness required that Great Storm broach the subject first.

"Please thank my brother, Red Stag, for his thoughtful gifts and kindly carry a small gift from me as a token of my respect. We all look forward to the meeting with your village next summer. I haven't seen the shores of the lake for a long time and it's been three summers since our people have laughed together."

"I will be happy to carry your gift and your message." Fighting Badger bowed his head and waited.

"Did Red Stag also send a personal message for me?"

"Great Storm. Your brother wanted me to mention that his grandson, Winter Wolf, is growing and is almost ready to become a hunter. When our peoples last met there was talk of a potential mating between our villages—a symbol of our continued strong ties. Red Stag wanted me to ask you about this . . . passing thought, to see if there might still be an opportunity for your granddaughter, Morning Song, to join us as Winter Wolf's mate, and to further strengthen our kinship. Is the girl well?" he asked, although he knew the answer to this last question already.

Great Storm smiled when he thought about his only living granddaughter. "Yes, the girl is still healthy and has started to learn from her mother. Please tell my brother, Red Stag, that this seems a good thought. If such a mating were to happen, we would think it good for the young hunter to live with us for a season or two. This would also allow time for the girl to finish her training. We can discuss this important matter next summer when we meet. You will have the opportunity meet

with the girl tonight, and you can take back your own impression of her character and upbringing. And I look forward to meeting young Winter Wolf again soon.”

“Thank you Great Storm. I know that Red Stag will be gratified that you would consider offering such a rare and cherished part of your village. I will be delighted to meet with the girl and her family tonight.” Both men continued to exchange pleasantries and to share information about friends and recent events. Neither man showed any sign that the matter that had been raised was settled— negotiations for a mating of this kind might last for many days.