Chapter 4

Wedewolves

Rose stayed in her fir tree the rest of the night, her heart jumping. When morning came, she climbed stiffly down. She had spent a day and a night in that tree, and she couldn’t endure another minute. The gurgle of the stream was driving her crazy.

Kneeling in the stream, the girl scooped water up in her hands until her thirst was satisfied. Then she stood and wiped her mouth and hands on one of the dry parts of her dress.

“Time to move on,” she said without making much sound.

It was the first time she had traveled during the day since her escape. She felt uncomfortably exposed by the bright sunlight, but it was the obvious thing to do. The Yospaldons had said that wedewolves hunted at night. If she traveled by day, maybe she could sneak past them.

“No one from the castle will climb this high. I should relax. I’m sure it would be good for me.”

Again she spoke very quietly. A whisper would have been louder. Nervousness was still making her talk, but the effort to quit using a normal voice, which had been impossible down in the forested parts of the mountain, was coming easily now. She didn’t know if she could have spoken louder if she’d tried. The wedewolves of the high mountain terrain had insisted on proving their existence, and there was nothing she could do about it.

“At least they stopped the Yospaldon hunting dogs. And there’s the Maker. He, he’ll maybe—”

Her sentence trailed off.

“I hope he’ll do something*.”*

She started up the stream again at what felt like a crawling pace. The sun was overhead when the trees ended. Past the timberline, the mountain looked pretty bleak. When summer had fully arrived, the ground would warm up enough to host whatever wild grasses and flowers could survive a high altitude, but at this time of the year there were only rocks and hard earth. Everything was a dull grayish-brown and looked cold. At least she could still walk in the stream, though it was getting smaller.

“I wouldn’t want to do without it.”

As if the words gave birth to the fact, she went past a big rock and stopped with a gasp. Water was gushing from a hole in front of her. She had climbed to the stream’s source.

Rose stared wildly around. The high ground sloped steeply up with patches of snow here and there. Big mounds of snow covered the peak, but she didn’t have to go that high. What she needed to do was cross to the other side, but the mountain was very wide at this point. It narrowed considerably as it rose higher though. If she climbed further, the distance to the other side would be less.

She had a short distance left in the stream. Rose splashed forward and then stopped again, staring at the ground above the beginning of the stream. Ever since she had left Yospaldo, the stream had protected her, but from this point on she would leave her scent with every step. Shaking a little and frowning furiously, she lifted her feet out of the water and started walking.

*What did you expect?* *No stream’s going to run up one side of the mountain and down the other! Maybe there’ll be another stream on the other side. The snow’s beginning to melt. There really might be another stream.*

Not long after that one of Rose’s shoes disintegrated. There was no other word for it. She wasted several precious minutes trying to fix it, but the whole thing fell to pieces in the end. The other shoe was in bad shape too. With sudden decision, she ripped them both off and gingerly held her sore feet, wincing at the touch. A few of the blisters were pretty nasty. She should have brought some medicine. Rose threw the shoes under a rock and went on feeling lightheaded. *It must be the altitude.* Thirty minutes later, she realized that she shouldn’t have left the shoes. Something might find them. Something might track her down from them. *It’s too late now*.

She was going slower and slower. The soles of her feet felt alternately hot and cold, but the rest of her was consistently cold even though it was the middle of the day. Eventually Rose decided she’d climbed high enough to make the distance around the mountain less. She started going sideways, stopping once to take food from her backpack.

When she looked at her feet, they were swollen. She quit looking at them and kept going. An hour later, a loose rock tripped her and she fell into the shadow of a boulder. It was so much colder in the shade that she gasped. Crawling forward into the sun, she propped her aching feet on a rock. Maybe they’d stop throbbing if she elevated them. Her breathing slowed down as she rested and she didn’t feel quite as dizzy.

*How am I going to know when I’ve reached the other side?*

Rocks and dirt surrounded her here, exactly as they had when she’d first started going around the mountain. The difference was that the bigger rocks now had long shadows stretching far down the mountain slope. She stared uneasily at them for several minutes before her tired mind realized what they meant.

“The sun’s going down. What am I going to do?” she said out loud for the first time since leaving the stream.

Nervousness had made her talk; then it had made her stop talking; now it had made her talk again. The words still didn’t make much sound, but what sound there was trembled violently.

Painfully she pulled herself upright again, moaning when her feet touched the ground. *The sun’s going down. All right, then I’ll go down too. I don’t care if it’s the best place or not. I’ve got to get back to the forest.*

It was easier to go down than up. It was even easier to go down than sideways around the mountain. She could breathe better, which meant she wasn’t as dizzy—and the tree line was steadily getting closer.

The rock shadows lengthened. A cool breeze picked up and blew across the bare ground. Then the outline of the shadows blurred, and they disappeared. Rose walked faster. The sun had gone behind the mountain; that was all. It wouldn’t get dark right away. She had time to reach the trees if she hurried.

Even with the exercise, her teeth were chattering. She wished she had brought a jacket. There was her blanket, but she didn’t want to stop and unpack.

When a dark object loomed up on her right, Rose instinctively shied away from it.

“A tree! It’s a tree!”

She’d been concentrating on where to step for so long that she’d forgotten to check on the tree line. A few stunted firs were already on either side of her.

“Not long now. Reach the forest. I’ll be safe in the forest.”

She couldn’t think clearly, but the forest meant safety. The wedewolves wouldn’t find her in the forest. They didn’t hunt there. Did they?

*Can’t think.*

It was definitely getting dark now, but she was passing more and more trees. In a few more steps—then the eerie, drawn-out wail of a wedewolf drifted through the air.

“No,” she whimpered and started to run despite the pain in her feet.

She was in the forest at last but would the trees really protect her? Her mind chose that moment to remember the Yospaldon hunting dogs. Wedewolves had come into the forest to attack them. They wouldn’t hesitate to follow a lone girl, easy prey. Another and another wail sliced through the air. They were on her trail. They had to be. Rose ran through the forest, no longer trying to find the best place to put her hurt feet. She had forgotten about climbing a tree. She ran like a hunted animal fleeing in panic from stronger, faster foes. The wails rose in evil harmony, steadily gaining on her.

A mass of tall mountain bushes appeared in front of her. Closely intertwined branches were everywhere except for one place at ground level.

It might have been the way the branches grew; it might end in three feet, but it looked like a path and Rose plunged straight into it. The forest had been dark but thick leaves surrounded her now, blocking what little light the night sky provided. Rushing blindly onwards, she guided herself with her hands. It was a wonder she didn’t fall, but a low light had come into view up ahead, and that steadied her.

The light marked the end of the path. Racing out of the mass of bushes, Rose found herself at the top of a hillock that stood above a small clearing. There wasn’t time to take it all in. One hurried step further was as far as she got before a foot caught on an exposed root and she rolled down the slope. Something soft stopped her. She lay without moving, eyes closed tight. Unfortunately, closing her eyes didn’t make everything go away. The howls of the wedewolves came closer; the something soft stayed soft and solid against her back.

Then it shifted and her eyes sprang open. She found herself staring at the head of a mountain sheep. There were two of them—the one that had kept her from rolling any further and the one next to it. The two sheep were lying on the grass, chewing as if they were settling down for a peaceful night’s sleep. Their expressions were placid and calm, which was remarkable considering the fiendish wails that had taken over that part of the mountain world.

A movement at the top of the slope made Rose tense convulsively. The clearing was lit by the night sky, but it was dark where the bushes ended, so dark that she could barely see the tall stag with massive antlers that stood facing the small party of three at the bottom of the slope.

The stag turned. Its antlers swept across the night sky. Then it was gone.

In less than a minute, the wails veered sharply off to the right. At the same time they increased in intensity, as if the wedewolves had sighted prey that interested them more than a girl who couldn’t run fast. *The stag!*

Rose listened, hardly daring to believe what her ears were telling her. Maybe the hunters would change their minds and come back—but they didn’t. Their wails were harder to hear as they got further away. Then they abruptly cut off. The wedewolves must have gone around the mountain.

“I hope they don’t catch that stag,” she said with a catch in her throat.

If she had met the tall animal with its huge antlers alone in the forest, she would have been terrified, but it seemed, it really did seem as if it had deliberately led the wedewolves away.

*Don’t let them hurt it*, she found herself begging.

Of course, whether the wedewolves caught up with the stag or not, they might get back on her trail. They never quit, the Yospaldons said. What should she do?

The sheep continued slowly chewing, and Rose found herself yawning. It had been the most horrible day of her life; her body was freezing; her feet were throbbing; her nerves were out-of-control. Nevertheless she yawned and looked once more at the sheep. Their thick horns curled back in circles. Large bodies of wool bunched out behind their faces. At a different time, she might have laughed at the big bodies, small heads, and jaws that went on steadily, reassuringly chewing. Rose yawned again and curled up close to the sheep that had stopped her fall.

The second sheep pushed to its feet and ambled to her other side. With a contented grunt, it settled down almost on top of her. Thick, luxurious wool was on either side and above her. Rose felt its soft insistent warmth for less than a minute before falling into a deep sleep.

A fire crackled nearby. It was a pleasant sound. Rose lay drowsily and listened to it until an air current moved a hair on her neck, tickling her. Without opening her eyes, she began to lift a hand to push away the hair, but the hand dropped down again. Her arm was sore.

It was tempting to sink back into sleep, but she made herself open her eyes. The darkness that met her gaze was what she expected to see. It had been nighttime after all when she’d gone to sleep, but the rough wooden beams over her head weren’t supposed to be there.

Still partially asleep, Rose puzzled over them. The fire crackled once more and she turned her head toward it. A half-circle of firelight illuminated a rough wooden floor. She couldn’t see much else when she looked around, but Rose could tell by the very feel of things that she was in a small room, though she couldn’t remember how she had gotten there. The cot under her wasn’t very comfortable, but there were warm blankets over her.

She had to change positions. One leg was bent at the knee while the other was straight. From the feel of things, they had been in that position for a long time. She had to move them. With an effort, she straightened one leg and bent the other.

The new position was a relief, but the blankets rubbed gently across her feet as she moved them, and Rose had to bite her lips to keep from crying out. Something stirred on the other side of the room. Then there were footsteps, coming toward her. Rose shrank into the cot, but that didn’t stop the dark form of a man from leaning over her.

He placed a hand on her forehead. “Are you awake? Your temperature’s—”

Rose clenched her fists and hit at his chest. Fear gave strength to her arms. The man stumbled backwards and sat down hard on the floor next to the cot.

“What was that—” he began asking indignantly, but Rose interrupted him.

“Don’t touch me!”

“I—”

“Leave me alone, do you hear!”

The man sat as if thinking it over. When he got to his feet, Rose shrank as far from him as she could on the narrow cot, but he didn’t step in her direction. Instead he put more wood on the fire and returned to the other side of the room.

Moving her legs had hurt. In fact, now that she was completely awake, Rose could tell that every part of her body hurt. The night slowly passed. She had time to decide that her legs hurt the most, with the exception of her feet, which were in a category all by themselves. As the hours passed, each foot throbbed worse and worse until she had to bite her lips again to keep from moaning.

Dawn brought a dim light into the room. Rose looked frantically around; she was in a small, dirty, one-room cabin. The man was sleeping on the floor across from her.

*He’s a young man. That’s bad. I’ve got to get out of here.*

With a tremendous effort, she pushed herself up. She did it very quietly, but the young man instantly stirred and sat up too. He rubbed a hand across his eyes and yawned. Then he glanced at her.

“I’m leaving,” Rose hissed like a cat and felt like one too—a very angry cat with fur bristling on its back, claws outstretched and ready.

“Are you now? Don’t you want more salve on your feet first?” he responded in an unexpectedly pleasant manner.

“No,” she said.

*Is there a salve that will help my feet?*

Rose wanted it.

*Give me the salve; you go away.*

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and her feet touched the floor. In an instant they were back on the bed and she was leaning over them, clenching her teeth.

*What am I going to do?*

The man was there then, dipping his hand into a small container.

“The touch will hurt at first, but the salve will numb your feet. It will help for a couple of hours.”

He bent down and touched the bottom of a foot. Rose screamed and thrashed about, but the man held her feet one at a time and applied the salve quickly. He was right about its effects. The numbing came immediately, and Rose felt relief so intense that she couldn’t speak.

“Right—I’ll get water and we’ll have breakfast.”

He walked to a filthy little window in the front of the cabin and peered out. When he stayed there, Rose lifted her head and stared at him. He wasn’t particularly tall and his sandy-colored hair was closely cut around his head as if he didn’t want to bother with it. The Yospaldon women wouldn’t have liked either of those things. They liked tall men with long hair that they could curl around their fingers. They would have liked this man’s face and build though. They would have liked the color of his hair and his alert brown eyes. *Bleh.* Her eyes narrowed. She could clearly hear water running outside. There must be a river or a stream next to the cabin. Why wasn’t the man getting water like he’d said?

“Afraid to get wet?”

“What?” the man asked, turning away from the window.

“You were going for water.”

He turned back to the window.

“Yes, I was, but I don’t think I will after all. I don’t like the company I’d have if I left the cabin.”

Rose froze. She didn’t know how she had gotten to that cabin. She couldn’t remember anything that happened after she fell asleep between the two mountain sheep, but she remembered quite clearly what had happened before then.

“What’s there?” she asked shakily.

“Wedewolves,” the man answered matter-of-factly.

Rose’s eyes darted about in a panic, but the walls of the small cabin were solid. She was safe enough if you counted being alone with a strange man safe. Then her eyes focused on the light seeping in through the dirty window, and she corrected the man sharply.

“They can’t be. Wedewolves don’t hunt during the day. Everybody knows that.”

The man didn’t answer. He continued standing by the window, staring outside. Several minutes passed.

“Did you actually see a wedewolf?” Rose asked as insultingly as possible. She didn’t trust this man. She’d almost rather be at the mercy of a wedewolf.

He didn’t answer her question. The cabin’s back corner had captured his attention, the one on the other side of the fire from Rose’s cot. Swiftly he moved to the fire and drew out a thick stick of wood burning brightly on one end. He went to the corner he had been staring at and pushed the red-hot end of the stick against the side wall, a foot from the corner and four inches up from the floor. A sliver of wood from the burning stick fell to the floor, but he didn’t seem concerned. He stepped on it with his heavy boots and kept on holding the stick to the wall. Smoke began to fill the room.

Rose gazed wildly around again. She was trapped in a dirty cabin by a lunatic and she couldn’t stand up, much less walk. Lying back on her pillow, the girl closed her eyes. She needed to decide what to do. It was absolutely urgent to decide what to do. Unfortunately, nothing came to mind.

The minutes passed slowly. Then smoke wafted over to her side of the cabin and made her cough. That did it. She couldn’t stay quiet any longer. It might be hopeless, but someone had to try and talk this man out of burning the cabin down with them in it. She would use easy words that would get through to him.

“Are you crazy?” burst from her mouth. It wasn’t exactly what she’d meant to say, though it did seem to fit the occasion.

“No,” the man answered, not even glancing in her direction.

He threw the stick into the fire. Then he picked up another one and moved quickly over to the place on the wall that was now smoldering. A billow of thick smoke crept along the floor.

“Yes, you are. Why else would you want to burn the wall?”

He laughed.

“I told you already what I was going to do.”

He started to say more, but his laughter had infuriated Rose. The Yospaldons had laughed at her too.

“You said you were getting water. Why don’t you?” she spat out, leaning forward.

He laughed again as he carefully applied the burning end of the stick to the wall.

“I am,” he answered her evenly.

The fact that he was the one staying calm and not her infuriated Rose even more than his laughter. “You’re insane,” she sputtered.

“It’s not the usual method, I’ll admit, but since I don’t care to be eaten by wedewolves, I’ll take it. Breakfast will be later than I planned. My cereal needs hot water to soften it. Do you think you can wait or do you want some of the dried food from your backpack?”

“You went through my things,” Rose protested with fresh outrage.

“Of course I did, for several reasons.”

“You had no right. Stay out of my backpack from now on,” she ordered in the snooty manner she’d once heard a Yospaldon countess use. She had despised the countess at the time but didn’t mind copying her now if it would keep this man away from her.

He didn’t answer. The wall wasn’t in flames but there was the beginning of a hole in its side now. The man threw the stick into the fire and pulled a knife from his belt. He scraped a large clump of fire-blackened wood out of the hole with the knife and then went to the fire for another stick with a red-hot end. Rose watched through narrowed eyes. She didn’t want to talk to this man; she didn’t want anything to do with him, but as the silence grew, she couldn’t help bringing something back up.

“Did you actually see a wedewolf?” she asked and couldn’t keep a tremor out of her words.

He answered gently, “More than one. Daytime isn’t their preferred time to hunt, but they will follow a quarry until they catch it or die in the attempt. It’s not that they’re hungry.”

There was an edge to his voice, as if he were upset about something. Rose put it down to cowardice and gave herself another reason to despise him. Five minutes later, a swirl of thick smoke moved over the cabin floor straight up her nose. She coughed heavily and one of her feet bumped against the blanket, bringing tears to her eyes. The numbing effect of the salve must be wearing off. She clenched her teeth.

*I’d rather die than ask him for more*.

Ten more minutes went by with the man boring deeper and deeper into the wall. Rose lay motionless on her cot, bracing herself against the pain that grew until both feet were throbbing once more. Eventually the man stopped and examined his hole. Then he walked to the front of the cabin where he studied a crack in the floor as if it were of utmost interest. Rose couldn’t stand it.

“How many holes does your cabin have? Not enough obviously, since you spent all morning making another one. Maybe you could sweep a little of the dirt into that crack you’re so interested in.”

She stared disdainfully around the dirty room.

“It’s not my cabin,” the man muttered in Rose’s direction, but he wasn’t really paying attention to her.

Instead he reached for his knife again and started widening the crack where it was slightly rotten at the edges. The wood yielded quickly to his sharp blade. Before long he had made a sizeable hole.

Rose heard something leap onto the porch outside and gasped with renewed fear. This lunatic was going to let the wedewolves inside the cabin. All they had to do was go under the porch—but the man ran quickly back to the hole he had made in the back wall and stabbed the center of it with his knife.

Water gushed from it, a swiftly moving stream that flowed straight across the cabin floor and out the widened crack as if it had been told what to do.