Talus

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

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Ames, Iowa

2016

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When, after considering several more literary projects for my thesis, I committed to writing *Talus*, I realized a grueling research project awaited me. In order to write a successful “talking animal” novel for a young adult audience, I had to revisit the classics of anthropomorphic fiction (my favorite genre as a child), study equine behavior, deepen my knowledge of the mustang controversy, a hot topic in the American West, and learn the natural history of Oregon’s dry side, where my book takes place. The task intimidated me, so I began with the most enjoyable part of my preparation: re-reading the literature that thrilled me in my youth.

I tackled everything from Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty* to Henry Williamson’s *Tarka the Otter* to Tad Williams’ *Tailchaser’s Song* to David Clement-Davies’ *The Sight*. However, two novels helped me shape *Talus* more than the rest. The first is Richard Adams’ *Watership Down*, an epic story of survival told from the perspective of a group of rabbits in search of a new warren. Adams increases the credibility of his speaking, reasoning, and often eloquent nonhuman characters by assigning them a species-specific lore. The rabbits pray to the sun god Frith, celebrate a trickster figure called El-ahrairah, and have their own words for concepts such as “night” and “day.” As a result, readers can suspend their disbelief with relative ease; Adams has acknowledged that animals are different from—but not inferior to—people through a single key literary strategy. Unfortunately, this strategy is now a cliché. Almost every work of anthropomorphic fiction published since *Watership Down* topped the *New York Times* bestseller list invests its cast with a similar mythology. Some even border on plagiarism.

I decided to earn my horses’ human qualities in a different manner: complex yet equine-appropriate introspection. While the title character reflects on her life as often and
philosophically as a person, she seldom thinks about anything that does not pertain to the struggle to survive. Seasonal changes, resource availability, competition with rival bands of mustangs, or the hazards of foaling inspire even her most abstract ponderings. Her ambitions, too, fall within the parameters of wild horse society. She yearns to become a lead mare like her dam, Spurge, mate with the handsome bachelor stallion Fireweed, and protect her frail sister Draba. Other than that, her needs are simple. While I fear my book is still overly anthropomorphic for some readers’ taste, I’m determined to differentiate Talus from the string of Watership Down knockoffs that precede it.

The second major influence on my novel is Felix Salten’s Bambi, the source material for the Disney film. This underappreciated coming-of-age tale unfolds with the simplicity, beauty, and darkness of a fable, following a single roe deer from birth to adulthood to acceptance of mortality. When I re-read the book and its equally moving sequel, Bambi’s Children, I realized Talus would benefit from a similar narrative arc. Why complicate a universal and emotional plotline? My goal, after all, was not to break literary ground, but to tell an engaging story in lyrical yet immediate prose.

However, I also recognized that Talus had to be a more multifaceted character with more multifaceted problems than Bambi. In the early 1900s, most animal novels were either didactic or quasi-realistic. (For example, in Jack London’s Call of the Wild, the sled dog Buck experiences love, hatred, and even vengeance but never speaks.) Salten’s deer, neither allegorical figures nor mute beings, did not fit into these established traditions. Their uniqueness appealed to readers to the extent that few criticized Salten’s thin characterization even though his protagonist’s defining traits are one-dimensionally positive. 21st century fans of anthropomorphic
fiction expect more complex characters. Talus had to have personality. Flaws. An unbecoming willfulness. And her mistakes would allow me to deviate from a tidy bildungsroman narrative.

I next dedicated myself to the study of equine social structure and behavior. Like the majority of consumers of Wild West films featuring stallions fighting to the death over mares or thundering along at the front of large herds, I assumed mustangs lead violent, male-dominated lives. This conception proved woefully inadequate. I am indebted to many sources for correcting my misperception, but Robert Vavra’s *Such is the Real Nature of Horses* and Hope Ryden’s *Wild Horses I Have Known* stand out.

Vavra’s text, a compendium of photographs and written observations, documents the complex relationships that exist between stallions, mares, and their offspring. While reviewing *Real Nature*, I realized male mustangs do not run at the head of their bands but at the rear, where they are better able to keep their mates together and safe. Furthermore, their battles seldom result in serious injury. Most conflicts begin—and end—with ritualistic posturing, including pawing, snorting, and exhibitions of speed. Skirmishes erupt only if these “negotiations” fail. More valuable information gleaned from Vavra: fillies stay with their parents until their first estrus, colts until they turn two or three; adolescents then either breed with a stud or join a bachelor band depending on their sex; and stallions sometimes steal each other’s mares by herding them from the group, after which their allegiance switches to their new possessors.

Ryden’s book, also a combination of images and prose, was even more useful. She devotes just as much attention to the female as the male, a key move for my purposes, given that my protagonist is a filly and the bulk of wild horse research pertains to stallions. What I discovered surprised and delighted me. Mares play an active role in the safety of their bands. Every family has a high-ranking female, often a seasoned or athletic individual, who takes
charge during crises and picks out the best forage sites. She is not her mate’s subordinate, but his
colleague. My main character could be as strong-willed, physical, and dynamic as Walter
Farley’s The Black or Elyne Mitchell’s Thowra.

An understanding of wild horse social structure is one thing. An understanding of wild
horse body language is another. I am familiar with equine behavior—my great-grandparents
trained thoroughbreds and infected me with the racing bug—but I had to move beyond that
knowledge to immerse myself in Talus’s world. The occasional pinning of ears or flaring of
nostrils would not be enough to make my mustangs believable. They had to display a range of
mannerisms that could be combined or conflated much like human language. Otherwise the
average reader, as opposed to someone with a high tolerance for anthropomorphism, wouldn’t
buy their ability to speak.

Fortunately, I happened upon a copy of Tom Ainslie’s and Bonnie Ledbetter’s The Body
Language of Horses. This indispensable guide to equine communication covers the psychology
behind retracted nostrils, arched necks, raised tails, and other seemingly meaningless gestures.
Thus, I was able to pair my mustangs’ words with appropriate actions. For instance, when Talus
quarrels with a bandmate, she doesn’t just admonish the other horse; she also tosses her forelock
or pulls her muzzle taut.

Ainslie and Ledbetter clarify the way horses see, smell, and listen to their surroundings as
well. I started Talus with an acute appreciation of the powers of the equine ear and nose.
However, I didn’t know very much about how ungulate sight differs from our own. Most prey
animals have laterally placed rather than forward-facing eyes; this gives them excellent
peripheral vision. On the other hand, they can’t hone in on minutiae with as much accuracy as
people, and their ability to perceive red and its variations is still up for debate. After some artistic
soul-searching, I decided to ignore these facts. I’m too visual a writer to sacrifice either my attention to detail or nuanced color palette. The joy would go out of my prose.

I saved the most daunting task—to educate myself about the controversial roundups of mustangs in the American West—for the later stages of my research. My home state, California, has a low wild horse population compared to Utah, Oregon, Nevada, Montana, and Colorado. As a result, I had a poor grasp of the subject. To begin *Talus* with the proper context, I read a number of scholarly articles, books for laymen and women with an interest in natural resource allocation, and literature by mustang activist groups such as The Cloud Foundation. I also watched hours of professional and amateur footage of “gathers” (a Bureau of Land Management, or BLM, euphemism for roundups) and photographed the wild horses of southeastern Oregon.

Once more, I would like to acknowledge the sources with the most impact on *Talus*. Hope Ryden aided me again in the form of her masterwork, *America’s Last Wild Horses*, which, in part, led to the passage of legislation that granted federal protection to mustangs for the first time in history. The book covers everything from the evolution of *Equus caballus* in what we now call the Wild West to its extinction in North America in the late Pleistocene to its domestication in Europe during the Bronze Age.

More importantly from my perspective, Ryden also discusses the horse’s reintroduction to its evolutionary birth site, influence on both white settlers and the indigenous people of the Great Plains, and current status as a nonnative species that can be culled en masse. When I finished the text, I had a firm understanding of the challenges confronting the estimated 30,000 mustangs in the United States. Though they roam the terrain that shaped their morphology and behavior over a period of fifty million years, they are considered “harmful exotics” instead of environmentally valuable returned natives. Though cattle outnumber them fifty to one, wild
horses take the blame for every overgrazed meadow or trampled riparian zone on the range. Though they are icons of wildness and freedom, the majority of the American public doesn’t realize they still exist, much less face total elimination. No wonder the BLM continues to reduce their numbers with little resistance. While my protagonist and her bandmates lack insight into the rationale behind the roundups, I have integrated my knowledge of the political state of affairs in wild horse country into the novel on an implicit level.

I also made use of videos shot by mustang advocates such as Craig Downer, Elyse Gardner, Ginger Kathrens, and Laura Leigh. The BLM rarely shares footage with the public, so these videos were a tremendous help to me in terms of understanding the logistics of the helicopter gathers featured in *Talus*. While I’m not satisfied with my depiction of wild horse culling—I need to head West to gain firsthand knowledge of the process—I wouldn’t have been able to complete my novel without some form of documentation. That said, the films I screened pained me. I saw a stallion fracture his neck in an attempt to escape a holding pen, a lead mare run herself lame only to be captured anyway, and a foal collapse from exhaustion. This was by far the most draining component of my research.

Finally, I had to improve my comprehension of the natural environment of *Talus*: southeastern Oregon. In order to remain accurate, I based Talus’s home, Mount Mesteño, on a fault-block formation called Steens Mountain. Donald H. Mansfield’s *Flora of Steens Mountain* was the single most important text in the final phase of my preparation. This book provides the common/scientific names, reproductive cycles, and elevation distribution of the major plant species on or around Steens. This allowed me to check the authenticity of my descriptions of habitats ranging from clay barrens to willow thickets to summit ridges. I hope I have done justice to Oregon’s dry side.
Of course, research can’t compete with raw experience. I concluded my “homework” for *Talus* with a visit to Steens Mountain and the surrounding area. While there, I photographed each major vegetation zone that appears in my novel, starting with the sagebrush scrub at the base of the formation and working my way uphill to a vast juniper belt, a series of aspen groves, wind-mussed alpine meadows, and scree-littered inclines. Trees, plants, and geographical features I had learned about in the abstract stunned me with their beauty, intensity of color, and dynamism in stillness. When I resumed work on *Talus*, I had a much more extensive collection of images, sounds, and smells in my aesthetic arsenal.

I also encountered multiple bands of mustangs. A grulla mare similar to my protagonist led one of those bands. She studied me from a distance, ears cocked, head raised, and nostrils dilated. I had never seen an animal with her shrewdness or self-possession. By the time she galloped off with her companions in tow, her hooves drawing only a whispered protest from the bunchgrass, I knew she would be my muse, the horse I would conjure whenever *Talus* stalled. She and her kin, with their speed, courage, and devotion to their bandmates, are my heroes, my role models. May they always roam the American West. I don’t want to live in a world without mustangs.
BOOK I
In a meadow high on Mount Mesteño, when the lupine and paintbrush had begun to bloom, the black mare Spurge pushed her grulla daughter into the world hooves first. For a moment, both horses rested. The older lay on her side, her barrel expanding and shrinking as she breathed. The younger, a slick tangle, blinked eyes surprised by sight. Once or twice, she turned her head toward her dam’s hindquarters, knowing instinctively that the warm body that had created her would also nourish her in life. When she received no response, she kicked a little, trying to shake off the afterbirth that stretched between her legs like a wet hobble.

At last Spurge rose, lowered her muzzle, and washed her foal. The gentle weight of her mother’s tongue strengthened the filly. She raised herself into a semi-erect position, her limbs folded beneath her. Still, she didn’t look totally alert. Her ears were so limp that they bounced with every movement, scarcely resembling Spurge’s pricked, sensitive pair. It would be several hours before she could use them effectively. Her tail, too, lacked purpose. The bushy sprig flicked up and down instead of left to right in a brisk, fly-swatting motion. Every inch of the young mustang radiated a joyous ignorance, a pleasure in sensation alone.

Presently a terrible want entered the filly: hunger. The ache in her belly compelled her to stand. She reached with her forefeet, shoved with her hind, and lifted herself to all fours. Almost immediately, she tottered, her strides loose, even woozy. Yet she kept her balance. Spurge nickered approvingly. At eight years old, the mare had had many fine foals, including the handsome Bistort, now a respected band stallion, but none had shown such precocity.

The grulla wheeled around and made her way to Spurge with swinging baby steps. She bumped her snout against froth-spangled loins, searching for an end to her discomfort. Then she
found what she was seeking. Milk rushed into the pit of her stomach, hot and vital as her own blood. A shiver of happiness rippled her flanks. Here was energy, stamina, immunity, growth. Here as well was something deeper, more abiding. The moment the filly inhaled both the health-conferring liquid and Spurge’s grassy scent, she felt her universe shift so that the lovely, dark creature from which she had come became its blazing center. In short, she fell in love with her mother.

The newborn withdrew. Freed of her most pressing need, she took stock of her surroundings as much as her untrained senses would allow. Bunchgrass, each blade whitened by the climbing sun, spread in a tousled mat across the thin soil. Here and there a wildflower nodded in the wind, releasing the sweet, sharp odor of pollen. At the far side of the meadow, aspens reveled in the streaky morning light, the veins in their flimsy, triangular leaves shining silver, the leaves themselves tinkling when they struck each other. In the air, a magpie cried three times in quick succession, its voice raucous but bright. The bird’s broad-winged, long-tailed shadow passed over a rabbit grooming itself with brusque, forward thrusts of its paws. The tremulous animal dived for its hole, a cinnamon blur.

Overwhelmed by so many incomprehensible phenomena, the filly sidled over to her dam and pressed against the larger horse. Spurge craned her neck to study her daughter. The foal was a textbook grulla. Her shrew-gray coat ebbed to the richer shade of a raincloud on the head and below the knees and hocks. She also sported an inky stripe that extended from her withers to her rump and uneven barring on her forearms and gaskins. Only her conformation rivaled her color. The youngster had a straight profile, a wide chest, square hindquarters, and clean-boned legs that ended in delicate, hard-walled hooves. Yet her face stirred Spurge the most. Between the filly’s
well-spaced eyes, at the center of a raised vortex of fur, lurked a pale diamond. The marking gave her a particularly bold expression.

“What should I call you?” Spurge asked. “With your agility, you ought to have a special name.”

Uphill many meters, where the earth yielded to gravel punctuated by the odd daisy, a bighorn sheep sent a tiny phalanx of stones skittering. The black mare rotated her ears toward the noise. Though the band she co-led with the dun stallion Larkspur occasionally scaled Mount Mesteño to drink from the snowbanks that melted with a hiss at the onset of summer, the alpine zone truly belonged to the sheep. The land there was fierce, bleak, and rubbed raw by the elements. But it had its share of beauty with its cirques and tarns, scree and talus slopes…

Talus slopes! The rocks that comprised them, piling one on the other like the dislodged teeth of an enormous beast, matched the filly’s coat. Better, they reflected the character Spurge hoped her daughter would develop. To be a leader like her dam, the grulla would need speed, power, courage, and intelligence, abilities already manifesting themselves. But she would require something extra on top of that, a much rarer and more precious gift. As each boulder held up the next, the tiny mustang would have to support her bandmates, to view herself as part of a community and to act in its best interests. She would have to be selfless. And that trait could not be inherited. It had to be learned, accepted, chosen.

“Talus. You will answer to Talus. It suits you, don’t you think?” Spurge addressed the foal tenderly.

Talus didn’t understand. She gazed at her mother with a distant expression. The initial wave of exuberance from the milk had been replaced with the fatigue that often rushes upon those unused to life. A dim tide lapped at the edges of her consciousness. Gradually she dropped
to the ground, closed her eyes, and dozed. Spurge, whose own appetite had not been tended to, grazed nearby, listening to her filly’s gusts of breath, to the startled grunts she uttered when jolted by the fall of her tired head, to the intermittent thump of her tail against the grass. The black mare filled up with compassion. It was hard to be small. Wonderful, but hard.
Midday presented a challenge. The minute Talus woke, Spurge coaxed her to rise. A mustang only leaves her band to give birth. Once she and her foal have had the chance to gather their strength, they must return to their home range. As lead mare—the individual, as valued as the group’s patriarch, responsible for guiding the others to safety at the first sign of danger—Spurge felt the impulse more strongly than most. Talus would have to travel down Mount Mesteño at a decent clip whether her young legs were ready or not.

“Come on,” Spurge said, nipping her daughter on the rear delicately but insistently. “Up you go, my little one. The sun is already high in the sky.”

Talus, more in command of her body and rapidly learning how to speak with it by observing her dam, pinned her ears to express annoyance. The gesture was the equine equivalent of a first word. Spurge tossed her forelock, irritated and amused at the same time.

“Willful, are we?” she said, then bit Talus with more force. The filly cranked her neck up in alarm, drew her outsized legs underneath her, and raised herself into a standing position. Spurge immediately set off at a measured but steady pace. Talus followed her on uncertain, stilt-like limbs, driven forward by a fear of being left behind to face the vast mountain alone. Bit by bit, her strides grew controlled. She began to take delight in movement, in the smooth interplay of her tendons and the impact of hoof on sod. Now and again she squealed and bucked for joy and her ability to do so increased her pleasure.

As the horses descended, Talus’s sense of well-being deepened to astonishment. The world was so much bigger than she expected. At first it was just her birth meadow, a cool green sward interrupted by wildflowers. Then it transitioned to aspen groves, a closer but not stifling
environment that made the filly’s mobile skin quiver as she passed through shade. This zone opened into a spattering of junipers; the trees’ fleshy, berry-like cones emitted an acrid, peppery perfume as they ripened to blue with lavender notes. Presently sagebrush asserted itself, rising in glaucous sprays among bitterbrush and mahogany. Whenever Talus thought surely she had come to the end of the universe, another vista sprawled out before her in all its wild charm. Dizzied, she focused on the bunching and unbunching of the muscles in her mother’s hindquarters to center herself.

The animals the mustangs encountered also amazed Talus. A grouse exploded underfoot in a rainbow of earth tones—she sashayed to the right with her ears back and the whites of her eyes exposed. Three pronghorns leaped a stream, their apricot and vanilla jackets glossy, their short, standing manes abristle—she propped and threw up her tail. Bushtits cartwheeled through shrubbery in a mouse-colored mob, their high-pitched calls converging into a tinny cascade of sound—she stared until her dam neighed impatiently. All was perplexity. All was puzzlement.

After about an hour, Talus sagged with exhaustion, occasionally stumbling over stones. Spurge paused, allowed her daughter to catch up, and nursed her. A final flurry of energy would carry them down an incline into the valley where the black mare had left her band. If Larkspur and the others were still there, the foal could rest as long as she needed.

“All right, that’s enough,” Spurge said. “We’ve got to press on.” She stepped away from Talus, abruptly cutting off the meal. The filly stamped one foot but walked on without further protest. As they neared the valley, Spurge whinnied and halted, ears straining into a northerly wind. Another horse answered her. She jogged through a swell of rabbitbrush with Talus at her hip.
Several mares trotted over to them, eyes wide and tails streaming. A dunalino—butter-yellow with an eggshell mane—accompanied by a matching newborn reached the two quickest.

“We thought you would be back this morning. Is everything okay?” the lighter mustang asked. Her name was Milfoil and she and Spurge had been close friends since before Larkspur stole them from the buckskin Finch.

“Yes. It was just a hard birth,” the black answered. She shunted Talus forward. “This little one turned out bigger than I expected.”

Milfoil trained large, dark eyes on the foal. “She’s certainly sturdy. And she stands so well! Why, she’s almost as steady on her feet as my Draba and she’s had two more days of practice. What will you call her?”

“Talus. She is athletic, if I say so myself. But Draba will be, too. Sometimes the late-developers are the swiftest and strongest in the long run.”

Spurge and Milfoil glanced at their daughters. The fillies sniffed each other intently. Draba blew into Talus’s nostrils, imitating the greetings she had seen adult horses give one another. The grulla, not yet understanding the meaning of the gesture, flinched, collected herself, and snorted her own “hello.” Their mothers exchanged warm looks. They hoped Talus and Draba would be as inseparable as they were. Female companionship, much more lasting than the regard of mare for stallion because the male may be overthrown by a rival within a relatively short time, would enrich the youngsters’ lives for seasons to come.

Milfoil and Draba retreated as a pair of mares, the elderly chestnut Penstemon and the strawberry roan Currant, approached to inspect the latest addition to the band. Talus, though intimidated by the presence of so many creatures larger than she was, allowed them to smell her flanks. Penstemon instantly won her affection. The old one’s touch was gentle yet self-assured.
In contrast, Currant, an excitable sort, prodded the filly’s ribs enthusiastically, nearly capsizing her.

“Careful, you silly thing!” Penstemon said, not unkindly. She and Currant were as intimate as Spurge and Milfoil.

“Sorry. She’s so lovely I couldn’t help myself. That color. She’s as gray as a storm. Storm! That’s what you should name her,” Currant said to Spurge.

“Too late,” Milfoil cut in to spare the lead mare the irritation of repeating herself, “her name is Talus.”

Another mustang, the burly chocolate-brown Vetch, pushed past Currant, who quickly moved out of nipping range. Beside Vetch pranced her colt Bitterroot, a classic dun who had inherited his mother’s stocky frame and forceful personality. A week old, he was stronger and more sure-hooved than Talus and Draba. The moment he spotted his grulla half-sister—Larkspur was the father of all three foals—he brushed his muzzle against hers, his neck arched half in truculence, half in play.

Vetch shooed Bitterroot away with her head and examined the filly herself, scenting all along the tiny body. Talus perceived the mare’s power and grew aware of her own helplessness even more than when Currant jostled her. The sensation swelled to anger. Talus flattened her ears, whirled, and kicked out with her rear legs, striking Vetch in the chest. The move was too complex for the little grulla. She fell with a soft thud and scrambled upright winded.

Vetch said, “She’s a feisty one. A real mustang. Congratulations, Spurge.” The thickset horse tried to keep the jealousy out of her voice. Though Bitterroot was a bold colt, he had hardly attempted to assert himself on the first day of his life. He also lacked Talus’s refinement. As descendants of Spanish stock, the equines of Mount Mesteño were short-statured, compact
animals, but Bitterroot was blockier than most. He would not have the quickness of Talus or even Draba.

“Thank you,” Spurge said, gazing at her daughter proudly. She did not acknowledge Vetch’s insecurities about Bitterroot as she had allayed Milfoil’s concerns for Draba. The two mares weren’t on good terms—Vetch resented Spurge’s dominant role within the group, a position she thought she deserved.

A ringing neigh announced the band stallion Larkspur. He was a handsome dun so battle-scarred that his buff coat had attained a raked, and, in some places, stippled appearance. To Talus, he seemed enormous. Yet she felt no fear when he offered his great, black-skinned muzzle to her. Unlike Vetch, he was secure in his strength and therefore not a threat.

“A lovely filly. She’s a credit to her mother,” he said after subjecting Talus to the same olfactory investigation the others had applied to her. He wanted to add, “And to me,” but that would have been inappropriate. A stallion could not take too much interest in his offspring since it was his job to run them off once they matured. The task would be much more painful if he let himself love them as their mothers did.

“Thank you,” Spurge said. “Thank you all. Now, if you’ll excuse us, Talus needs to get some rest. She’s been on the move for quite a while. For such a small thing.”

The mustangs fanned out across the grass, the mares grazing contentedly, the stallion, as sentry and protector, feeding only sporadically as he sifted through the information carried to him on the wind. Spurge let Talus nurse uninterrupted. Again exhaustion descended. Her body aching with the strain of her pilgrimage from meadow to valley, her mind running over with fresh experiences, the filly dropped onto her side into perfect oblivion, the sun a hot iron on her withers. She was at peace with existence and her part in it.
On Mount Mesteño, spring was color. It was the deep yellow at the hearts of the daisies that somehow managed to grow from the gravely soil at the summit, dwarfed by constant exposure to the wind but clinging to life with a desperate energy. It was the purple-laced blue of the speedwell blossoms edging ponds and streams at every elevation. It was the almost abrasive green of the junipers, the plush teal of the meadows and valleys, the gray sweep of scrubland that turned the foothills into the raised hackles of some mythical predator, the tawny reach of the cracked and fissured clay barrens where the ground leveled out. It was the dappled, healthy glow on Talus’s lightstruck grulla coat.

The filly spent her early days learning the ways of the wild horse. Her band operated according to a well-defined hierarchy. Spurge and Larkspur were co-leaders. The mare used her knowledge of the land, part intuition and part experience, to find the best feeding and watering sites. The stallion, who usually positioned himself at the rear of the group to drive stragglers forward with a sinuous motion of his head, defended his posse from the odd mountain lion and the advances of other males. Next in rank came Vetch, who eclipsed Spurge in power but not in speed or intelligence. In spite of her displeasure at being relegated to a second-in-command position, she served the group with rare courage. Once she had stomped to death a rattlesnake gathering itself to strike an oblivious foal. Milfoil, too, was an asset. Neither particularly strong nor fast, the dunalino fell back on common sense to determine her course of action. Her stalwart if not sharp mind complemented Spurge’s more active one. Penstemon and Currant, though subservient to the rest, were valued for their kind dispositions, manifested in the older as extreme
solicitude, in the younger as high spirits. For the time being, the foals inherited the social
prestige of their mothers. Talus, then, was treated with a special deference.

The daily adventures of the band were much less rigid. Some mornings passed in placid
splendor, with the horses covering only a few miles in their search for the sweetest grass or the
most refreshing springs. Others called for sustained travel that tested the stamina of the three
little ones but burnt the baby fat from their ribs, hardening them into small replicas of their
parents. On occasion, the communal mood was so carefree that everyone from Penstemon to
Draba joined in a riotous game of “catch me if you can,” galloping through swishing bunchgrass
or crackling sagebrush. But if the fetid musk of a predator reached their nostrils, the mustangs’
behavior changed instantly. They quivered with barely restrained vigor, motive even in stillness.
Then Talus’s patience would be forced to its limits and she, Bitterroot, and Draba would chase
each other round and round to release tension.

Talus also learned how to communicate with her body. Her ears, once so aimless, became
her most articulate feature. She swiveled them forward to show good will, backward to indicate
annoyance, and sideways to express a sense of well-being. If her emotional state remained in
doubt, her facial muscles could be put to use. A motionless eye and relaxed upper lip told her
bandmates nothing was amiss, while tension in the muzzle broadcast irritation. Her tail, too, was
elloquent. If she whisked it though no flies worried her, the others knew she felt anxious and
sought the source of her unease. Even her legs spoke. A rear hoof balanced on its toe could
signal either sleepiness or anger building to a kick depending on the slackness of her haunches.
Within a few weeks of her birth, she was as conversant as any of the adults.

Her senses sharpened at an equally rapid pace. Eyes once too astounded by shape, color,
and value to order their surroundings now registered entire panoramas in a single glance, taking
in what lay before, beside, and behind her at the same time. Ears that had initially struggled to differentiate between sounds as unlike as the soughing of the afternoon wind and the plink of water against stone could identify the most minute noises: the low chuckle of a quail, the rasp of a snake’s scales on bare ground, the yawn of a mouse. Nostrils oblivious to every scent but Spurge’s earthy aroma suddenly whiffed the raindrops collecting in the divot of a mule deer’s back as the animal browsed beneath dripping boughs a mile to the west. Even Talus’s milk-dulled tongue detected and relished the many shadings of mountain life, from the sweet, sad taste of the bunchgrass she could not yet eat to the complex snap of the mineral deposits her dam taught her to lick for nutrients.

Talus’s early days each contained so much novelty that they may have washed together into a brilliant haze if something extraordinary had not happened when she was about a month old. The day was passing from the liquid pallor of morning into the duller but more sustainable light of noon. Spurge had guided the horses to a basin several thousand feet downhill from their usual mid-elevation haunts. Talus, Bitterroot, and Draba immediately splashed into the muddy shallows at the bottom of the large depression and rolled, coating themselves in silt that would later harden, crack off in shell-like pieces, and revitalize their hides. They were having too much fun to notice that their parents had grown still and alert until Draba paused in the middle of their antics.

“Look,” the little dun alino said, speaking more to Talus than Bitterroot, for as Spurge and Milfoil had hoped, the two fillies were already fast friends, “the adults are worried about something. What could be the matter?”

Talus, her forelock a dirty snarl, glanced at the bank, where her mother, the other mares, and Larkspur quivered and gazed all about them. “I don’t know,” she said.
They’ve been acting funny for a while now. Did you see Larkspur chase Currant through the valley yesterday? It was so strange! She hadn’t done anything to annoy him.”

“I don’t think he was annoyed. I think they were playing.”

“Playing?” Bitterroot cried. “Why would a grown stallion and a grown mare play together like a couple of foals?”

Talus ignored the scorn in her half-brother’s voice; Vetch’s jealousy of Spurge had caused him to adopt a similar attitude toward the grulla. She regretted her pronouncement, though—it was difficult to say why she thought Larkspur’s and Currant’s behavior was more of a romp than an altercation. “Well, their ears were up and Currant didn’t smell like fear, so they couldn’t have had a fight,” she said at length.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. They galloped right by me. They seemed happy. More than happy.”

The three young mustangs fell silent for a moment, considering the matter with great seriousness. The recognition that their lives did not neatly overlap with their bandmates’, that another richer and as yet incomprehensible realm of experience existed, rattled them to the core. Talus in particular hated the sensation—she hungered for knowledge but had no tolerance for mystery. Nor did she like the possibility that she was not her dam’s sole or even chief concern, that Spurge wanted and worried about and strived for anything beyond her daughter’s needs. Draba and Bitterroot, slightly less intelligent, felt rather than consciously wrestled with similar qualms about Milfoil and Vetch.

The foals could not afford to be pensive for long. Survival, herd dynamics had taught them, demanded attention to the present. And, in this case, the present reasserted itself with a jolt. The wind shifted and the source of the older horses’ alarm became clear: the odor of a trio of
stallions barreled from the east in warm gusts, growing more pungent by the minute. The smell sent Talus, Draba, and Bitterroot scrambling for their mothers.

“Who’s coming?” Talus asked as soon as she reached Spurge. The filly trembled with excitement. She had examined the spoor of strangers before, but had not encountered horses outside her family group yet.

Spurge dilated her nostrils. “It’s Fireweed and his companions Rimrock and Greasewood. They’re trouble. Stay close to me, Talus.”

“Trouble? Why? They wouldn’t hurt us, would they?”

“Not us mares. Larkspur, maybe.”

“But—”

“Hush. You’ll understand what this is all about someday. For now, just be ready to run when I do.”

Talus pressed up against Spurge and waited for the confrontation to begin. A shrill whinny, almost a scream, split the day. Larkspur answered it immediately, then pranced a nervous circle with his neck curved and his tail raised. Vetch, Milfoil, Penstemon, and Currant huddled together, also prepared to shadow the lead mare if the band had to flee. Draba and Bitterroot, like Talus, attached themselves to their dams.

“There,” Currant said, shivering as she repressed the urge to charge off full bore. The rest tracked her gaze and the direction of her ears to the top of the slope that dipped into the basin. A red dun stallion, his pelt the color of dry clay on his body and wet clay on his head, stood on the verge flanked by two smaller studs. One was a blaze-faced chestnut, the other a bay with a snip. All were four-year-old bachelors still below their mature weight. Individually, they would not
have been a threat to Larkspur. Working as a team, they were capable of cutting a mare out of
the band and claiming her for themselves.

“Fireweed’s much heavier than he was last year,” Milfoil whispered to Spurge, her eyes
fixed on the red dun. “He’ll be as big as Larkspur soon. You two will have to be at your best to
get us out of this one.”

Spurge also kept her voice low. “I’m more worried about his cunning than his power.
Watch out for Rimrock and Greasewood. He may have put them up to something.” Talus and
Draba, straining to hear their mothers’ conversation, exchanged half-fearful, half-spirited
glances. They had not experienced real danger before and novelty added pleasure to their terror.

Fireweed plunged into the basin, the chestnut Rimrock and the bay Greasewood fanning
out on either side of him. They came at a gallop, then a canter, then a trot, then a menacing,
mincing walk. Finally, they stopped altogether. Talus could see them clearly now. Fireweed was
magnificent. Even in stillness, his great body spoke of movement. Veins tingled on his neck,
webbed along the bridge of his snout, and spidered through the pink skin at the center of his
flared nostrils. His fine ears, hooked inward at the tip, revealed divided but acute concentration.
The right faced Larkspur while the left canted toward the mares and his fellow bachelors in
turns. Rimrock and Greasewood, less imposing yet handsome in the short-coupled style of their
breed, stared at Fireweed as if waiting for a cue.

Larkspur danced up to the red dun. Fireweed—and Talus’s admiration for him—shrank
as her father approached. The dun with the blemished coat had no peer on the mountain.
Watching the action, prepared to wheel into flight at any moment, his band surged with pride.
Spurge, Milfoil, and Vetch were glad to impart his blood to their offspring, the foals to carry it
within them.
Larkspur and Fireweed sniffed and snorted, searching for the sour odor of submission on each other’s flanks. Most conflicts between stallions end, not in violence, but an olfactory admission of defeat—no horse will risk serious injury if he can help it. But neither Larkspur nor Fireweed detected a whiff of uncertainty in his opponent. They stepped apart but remained so close that when the wind blew, their forelocks mingled, Larkspur’s mane scorched earth, Fireweed’s a flame about to die. A fearsome intimacy sprang up between them. It deepened until Mount Mesteño itself seemed to hold its breath.

Suddenly, too quickly for the onlookers to tell who had initiated the contact, the mustangs were locked in combat, biting, lunging, screaming, and kicking, each striving to throw the other onto his side. Fireweed scored first, sinking his teeth into Larkspur’s withers and tugging to pull him to the ground. The dun knew the trick. He pitched onto his back legs, torn but free. Fireweed squealed his rage and rose to meet Larkspur; both jabbed with their front hooves, landing heavy blows to the chest. A moment later, they crashed onto all fours. Larkspur whirled and struck out with his hind feet, catching Fireweed in the ribs. A bright, cheerful noise like the cracking of a twig pricked the mares’ ears. Bone had shattered. The younger stallion roared and circled as if chasing his own pain. But he swung out of his revolution ready to take more punishment.

The horses reared again. This time they did not batter one another with their hooves. They simply pushed, their hindquarters creased with effort, their forearms entangled in a vicious embrace. Larkspur leaned on Fireweed with such surrender he appeared on the point of collapse. Talus’s heart fluttered for her sire. She did not understand that he had actually gained the advantage, was tiring his rival by forcing him to bear his weight. Fireweed’s haunches began to tremble. He dropped his head to the right and chomped down hard on Larkspur’s shoulder. It was a desperate move. As soon as the band stallion felt the bachelor’s balance shift, he heaved with
all his power, muscles that had been relaxed an instant earlier charged with purpose. Fireweed somersaulted to the basin floor with enough momentum to knock a plume of dust, like released breath, into the air.

Rimrock and Greasewood charged the band. Spurge was right to fear Fireweed’s intelligence more than his strength—he had planned for every possibility. In the event of his defeat, his companions were to go after the females. Larkspur, the red dun hoped, would be too fatigued even after a victorious battle to fend off two more challengers. But the bachelor, blinded by his sex, had forgotten that the wiliness of mares often trumps the physical superiority of their male pursuers.

Spurge reacted instantly. She leaped into a dead run and cried, “To me! To me!” At once the black’s bandmates converged on her, thundering after their leader lapped too tightly upon one another for Rimrock and Greasewood to insert themselves into the group. They surged up the steep, hoof-beaten path out of the basin, stones clattering in their wake. Bitterroot slipped and landed on his knees. Vetch doubled back for him, lifting him upright with a smack from her head. He launched himself forward but to the right. Milfoil, with Draba beside her, checked to avoid him. Aware of the chaos behind her and of Talus’s ragged breathing—to keep in front with her dam, the grulla had burned through most of her energy already—Spurge slowed for a few seconds.

Rimrock, his sunlit blaze glittering like first snow, his lips peeled to reveal blunt but solid teeth, reached Currant’s shoulder. She swerved toward Penstemon for protection. He followed, bellowing. In his excitement, he knocked into Vetch’s rump. The chocolate mare planted both rear hooves into his chest. Rimrock slid downhill, winded. Greasewood sailed past him, gaining on the mares as he reached top speed.
Spurge heard the interval between his footfalls decrease (horses shorten stride as they quicken) and deduced that he meant to beat them out of the basin. She measured the distance to level ground, Greasewood’s acceleration, and the onrush of Larkspur, who, though tired from his skirmish with Fireweed, had given chase when he saw that his family remained in jeopardy. The next moment, she whirled, hurtling back the way she had come in a diagonal free-for-all and drawing Talus with her. Vetch and Bitterroot, then Milfoil and Draba, and finally Currant and Penstemon adopted the altered course. The band crossed behind Greasewood. The snip-nosed bay had sprinted ahead of Spurge just as she turned and now spun around to confront her only to face empty space. In the same heartbeat, Larkspur’s dash carried him between the mares and Rimrock, covering the band’s retreat. One final dodge—Fireweed had lingered below—and they were rolling up an alternate trail from the basin, in the clear with Larkspur at their heels.

The mustangs eased to a trot, the foals blowing. Larkspur, his withers drizzled with blood, stopped two or three times to shrill his indignation, warning the bachelors not to renew their mischief. He needn’t have bothered. Fireweed, Rimrock, and Greasewood had stayed at the site of their humiliation, the red dun to nurse his broken ribs, the chestnut and the bay to marvel at Spurge’s trickery.

Spurge led the band past the valley and through the sagebrush and juniper belt. At last she stopped in a small, aspen-fringed meadow divided by a creek. Talus, Draba, and Bitterroot drank deeply while the adults spoke in low, urgent voices.

“Larkspur,” Spurge said, “does your wound sting?”

“A little. That Fireweed can fight for such a young stallion,” the dun replied. He lifted his head and pricked his ears as if unconcerned, but he had sensed the great promise he had shown at a similar point in life in each of the red bachelor’s blows. As the passage of time weakened
Larkspur and strengthened Fireweed, the gap between them would narrow and ultimately reverse.

Milfoil said kindly, “He won’t be as powerful or as quick as you for a good while yet. And by then he’ll have his own mares and will be more invested in protecting them than causing trouble.”

“Speaking of trouble,” Vetch said, “I have to talk to my son. Bitterroot, come here!”

“Oh, Vetch, not in front of everyone,” Penstemon cried. She couldn’t bear cruelty of any kind, a trait that had made her a beloved but ineffective mother when she was of a foal-bearing age.

Vetch rounded on her elder. “What he did affected everyone! If he doesn’t learn the consequences of his actions now, he’ll never amount to anything.”

Bitterroot trotted over with Talus and Draba behind him. He slowed to a walk when he saw the severe set of his dam’s ears.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Bitterroot,” Vetch said coldly, “what have I told you about staying in your lane while running in a group?”

“Mother, I couldn’t help it. The ground broke under me.”

“But you leaped sideways, right into Milfoil’s path. You nearly caused a serious accident.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be. When there’s danger, the band becomes a single unit. You have to be aware of where we all are and which way we’re moving. Don’t you ever try a stunt like that again.”
Bitterroot trembled. Talus couldn’t tell whether he shook with shame or resentment. She felt a short stab of empathy for her sibling, but shrugged it off when she remembered his curt response to her speculation about their parents’ odd behavior. Besides, she was too full of the day’s events to think of much else.

Dozens of images blitzed through her mind. Fireweed’s clayspun coat alight in the sun...Larkspur’s gray-shelled hooves denting ribs...the near-vertical basin wall a seemingly never-ending chaos of gravel...Greasewood’s face taut with effort as he gained on the mares...Spurge altering course so neatly and naturally that her bandmates didn’t register the change in direction until they were hurtling downhill...Spurge so dark in the bright afternoon that she might have been a scrap of displaced night...Spurge zinging along at the front of the little herd, followed without question, her will the collective will...

A sharp longing filled Talus. For the first time in her life, she wanted something that could not be easily obtained like grass or water: to be as fleet, as brave, and as respected as her mother. To be a lead mare, perhaps even the greatest one on the mountain. She pranced over to Spurge, halted, and gazed at the black. Awe gave her love a new texture, something bold and brassy like sunlight, something humbling like the awful weight of the sky. The grulla filly found herself unable to approach.

Spurge sensed the hesitancy in her daughter and guessed its source. Her own dam had left a similar impression on her. Even now, years after her mother’s death, the mare always seemed to be chasing a beloved ghost, setting her hooves down in footsteps forever more adroit than hers. A stinging empathy filled her.
“Talus,” she said, nuzzling the filly until once more there was no distance between them, “if you continue to grow and learn, to face life willingly, one day you will be what I am. Maybe more than I am.”

Talus’s world opened with possibility.
The breeding season ended, spring darkened into summer, and the snow high on Mount Mesteño melted to a brittle husk, then vanished altogether. Talus became a nuisance. The escape from the bachelors had made her conscious of her mother’s importance and the ways in which it carried over to her. If she wanted to play but no one else did, she would nip or run in circles until her bandmates complied. If Bitterroot or even Draba pushed her as the horses filed to a spring to drink, she pinned her ears, curled her upper lip, and snaked her head to remind the offender of her rank. Sometimes she disobeyed Larkspur, straying from the group in spite of his calls for her to return. When he responded by herding her back to her dam, she flagged her tail in indignation.

Her behavior annoyed the others—particularly Vetch and Bitterroot—but it was also viewed as proper. Young horses had to test the limits of their social bonds to learn what role they would be best suited for in maturity. A filly with no spunk might never find her place in the herd. Besides, all foals emulated their parents to collect survival techniques; the offspring of dominant members of the band only had dominant body language to model themselves upon. No serious resentment was directed at Talus unless her headstrong temperament put others at risk.

That happened one late afternoon in the middle of July. The nighthawks were out early, scything the warmly glowing sky with narrow, sickle-shaped wings. Their celerity in the air and their querulous but stirring cries of *peent, peent, peent* drove Talus mad with love of life. She jumped straight up, landed, chased Bitterroot, chased Draba, and jumped again. Soon her wildness rubbed off on her half-siblings. The three raced across the same riparian meadow where Spurge had led them after their flight from Fireweed. Talus finished first as usual and recovered her breath in a moment. Draba came next, burly Bitterroot a few paces behind.
“Can’t we do something else?” the colt gasped, hoping for a game he could win. “I’d rather scuffle.” He reared up, imitating Larkspur, whose fighting prowess had influenced him as strongly as Spurge’s leadership had affected Talus.

Talus said haughtily, “Fillies don’t scuffle. Right, Draba?”

“Right,” the dunalino echoed. Milfoil had told her as much. Plus, she would not have disagreed with Talus for anything. As the grulla’s speed, strength, and confidence swelled, Draba’s affection for her changed from camaraderie to admiring devotion. She would have followed her sister anywhere, though she recognized that Talus often acted without thinking and tried to pull her back within the bounds of common sense.

“You two are no fun,” Bitterroot complained. “Well, then, what now?”

Talus hesitated. Their mothers expected them to remain near the band if they insisted upon playing while the grown animals were resting, but this particular meadow did not offer many diversions. The filly wanted to experience another part of Mount Mesteño, one that Spurge had forbidden her to visit without explaining why. The black mare had only said that creatures “not like us” lived there, a statement that made little impression on her daughter. The deer, with their enormous ears, split hooves, and airy strides, didn’t have much in common with the mustangs. Neither did the elk, whose slow, heavy footfalls exhilarated and saddened Talus at the same time. Not even the pronghorns and the sheep, as daredevil in their wildness as the horses, were “equine enough” to speak to as equals. Yet none of these species posed a threat.

“Let’s go to Willow Creek,” Talus said after a pause.

Bitterroot and Draba stared. The colt lashed his tail agitatedly.

“What are you talking about? We’re not allowed to go there,” he said.

“Are you afraid?”
“No.”

“Are you worried about upsetting your mother again?”

“No!”

“Then let’s go.”

Draba interrupted. “Hold on, Talus. Bitterroot has a point. There must be a very good reason for us to avoid that place. Maybe it’s dangerous.”

Talus shook her mane and snorted. “What could be dangerous?” she demanded.

“Sometimes, when the wind changes, a smell blows up from Willow Creek,” Draba said. “A smell of grass and body heat and one more thing I can’t name. It frightens me.”

“You’ve smelled mountain lion spoor before, haven’t you?”

“Yes. It wasn’t that.”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about. What else eats us?”

Bitterroot and Draba glanced at each other. They couldn’t find a flaw in Talus’s logic though they sensed it wasn’t sound.

“All right,” Bitterroot said at length, “we’ll go. But we shouldn’t be gone long.”

“Right. Just a quick peek,” Talus answered.

The foals grazed their way toward the southern edge of the meadow, the edge that fell away into aspen groves, with studied nonchalance. The dozing mares, lulled into uncharacteristic torpidity by the heat, heard the trio pass but did not register their departure. Larkspur, preoccupied with scent-reading the movements of Spurge’s son Bistort, whose family lived nearby, also paid no attention. Once they reached and picked their way through the trees, Talus and her companions were home free. They broke into a brisk but sustainable trot, altering their course slightly to travel southeast.
The young mustangs adopted the formation most natural to them; Talus jogged to the front with Draba at her flank while Bitterroot lingered at the rear. They didn’t know it yet, but they were mimicking the adults perfectly. Talus’s dominant personality carried her to the fore, Draba’s herd instinct commanded her to shadow the leader, and Bitterroot’s innate longing to protect the opposite sex slowed his step so he could shield the fillies if an enemy approached from behind. But though they did not grasp the rationale for their actions, they at least recognized that, when they were on the move together, they might as well have been a single organism. That, despite the friction between Talus and Bitterroot, each horse was prepared to fight and even die for the others if necessary. Their own love and bravery thrilled them.

Willow Creek was not far. The siblings had only been adventuring for half an hour before they detected the odor Draba had described. Talus dilated her nostrils—the smell indeed had many shadings. It contained the warmth of digested vegetation, the neutral aroma of muscle nullified by fat, and a simultaneously sour and bloody odor she had not encountered before. The first pleased her, the second unnerved her, and the third disgusted her. She blew air through her nose to clear it of that final, most offensive note, but the stench seemed to have burrowed deep inside. Something in her screamed, “Turn around!” The voice was as familiar as her body itself, but it rarely shrieked with such abandon.

“Should we head back?” Draba asked in a strangled whisper.

Talus faltered, but only for a second. Retreat would be an admission of cowardice and she was not and never would be a coward. “We’ve come too far. Anyway, we’re almost there. We might as well take a quick look around.”

“Come on, Draba,” Bitterroot said, nipping the dunalino lightly to keep her from lagging, “the sooner we get there, the sooner we can rejoin the band.” His kind tone irritated Talus—she
was possessive of her sister and hated the suggestion that she had upset the more timid filly. The connection between the youngsters briefly crumbled. Then Draba continued, more out of a desire to remain with Talus than the need to avoid Bitterroot’s teeth, and once again they progressed with their faith in each other intact.

Presently the mustangs reached their destination. A wide tract of bunchgrass bisected by a creek wider and deeper than the one in the meadow sprawled before them. On both sides of the waterway, strange animals drank, grazed, or drowsed in the fading light. Though four-legged herbivores like the horses, they inspired not just dread, but repulsion. From their stiff, short necks to their loose-skinned chests to their hanging bellies, they radiated contempt. Contempt for speed, stamina, intelligence, and the land. Contempt for everything that meant anything to the truly wild. How could they flee from predators with such blubber on their ribs and flanks? How could they climb rock-strewn precipices or weave through sagebrush on such stubby, broad-hooved limbs? How could they lash flies from their haunches with only a tiny tuft of hair on their tails? It was obscene to be so unfit for survival. Anger flamed in Talus’s gut. Anger, and an intense curiosity.

The grulla approached the nearest monster. It was solid black—they were all solid black—like her mother. But unlike Spurge, its eyes had no spark, no thought-given light. They seemed to recede into the licorice-colored face. Even the gauzy stares of trout and the unfocused gaze of subterranean beings like moles and gophers contained more evidence of life.

“Talus, don’t go any closer!” Draba cried. The dunalino wanted to run after her sister, but she couldn’t move. The awful smell emanating from the bizarre creatures had left her rigid with loathing. Now that the foals were only ten meters away, the odor was worse than ever. Its final, unknown component still summoned the most horror.
“I want to talk to them,” Talus replied. “I want to ask them what they are and what they’re doing here.”

Bitterroot tossed his forelock with a superior air. “They don’t know what they are or what they’re doing. Look how stupid they are! They’ve been feeding in the same place so long they’ve stomped the banks of the creek to bits and chewed the grass to its roots.”

Talus hadn’t noticed either transgression. Jealousy set her withers atremble—Bitterroot often absorbed details she missed in her impatient pursuit of knowledge and she despised being bested by him in any capacity. For the second time, the unity that had nudged the youngsters toward adulthood almost scattered. But Bitterroot was right. The weird animals had scooped great clods of earth from the wet dirt beside the water, uprooting the willow saplings that used to grow there and causing the little shore to bend and buckle. And beyond that the soil had been completely stripped of bunchgrass. No mustang would ever be foolish or ungrateful enough to use the mountain so abominably.

The grulla shook. Lack of survival skills was one thing. Disdain for the land was another. Fear made her insides washy. Oddly, Talus’s weakness increased her siblings’ courage. Doubt had to be offset by boldness for a band to flourish, to live with the unique blend of circumspection and improvisation necessary to the wild horse. Bitterroot and Draba joined Talus and together the offspring of Larkspur covered the last few steps to the beast.

“Hello,” Talus said to the monster. “I am Talus, daughter of the black mare Spurge. My friends are Draba, the dunalino Milfoil’s filly, and Bitterroot, the powerful Vetch’s colt. We wish to know what you call yourself and what you do with your days.”

Talus felt she had expressed herself simply and clearly. Yet the enormous animal did nothing but tear up a clump of grass and chew with circular motions of its lower jaw. The
mustangs could not tell whether it was ignoring them or was simply oblivious to their presence. They tried again.

Bitterroot demanded, “Did you hear Talus? Or are you just being rude? We belong to the most respected band on Mount Mesteño, so you’d better answer our questions.”

Draba hastened to make up for her brother’s tone in case the creature was only shy. “What he means is, we’d very much like to know you. Please tell us your name at least.”

The aberration fixed its eyes on Draba but kept pulping its food. At last it swallowed, grabbed a second mouthful of grass, and repeated the process. The foals looked about indecisively.

“Should we speak to someone else?” Draba asked, then lowered her voice. “This one might be...off.”

Bitterroot said, “They’re all off, Draba. That, or they’re not friendly. We shouldn’t waste our time with them.”

Talus had other ideas. She walked right up to the monster, extended her head, and blew into its nostrils, forcing an acquaintance. But instead of returning the greeting, the animal sneezed, then wandered away.

“How do you like that? How do you like that? They don’t even know how to exchange breath!” Talus spluttered. She stamped and kicked the air, throwing an equine tantrum. Bitterroot and Draba copied her to release their own tension. While the horses acted up, the mysterious ungulates stirred. They sniffed the air and swiveled their laterally placed ears, not attaining the alertness of mustangs but nonetheless displaying more attention to their surroundings than they had previously shown. A few began to low. While the range of sounds they could produce did
not rival the rich vocabularies of wild animals, their calls contained enough nuance to suggest both anticipation and dread.

“Hey!” Bitterroot said, suddenly growing still. “Something’s livened them up. What could it be?”

The foals smelled, looked, and listened. The scent Talus had deemed sour and bloody had increased in strength. It was no longer just vestigial, something lingering on the monsters’ coats; its source was heading directly toward Willow Creek. An alien noise accompanied it: the hollow beat of hooves perverted by a metallic, piercing ring. Talus, Bitterroot, and Draba huddled together. They would have run if terror hadn’t locked their muscles. Above them, the nighthawks continued to wheel and occasionally spin to snap up insects. There was still light, but the sky was reddening toward sunset.

A stallion appeared on the other side of the creek. A buckskin stallion whose black mane, tail, and socks contrasted with his yellow hide so dramatically that he called to mind a goldfinch. On his back swayed an unusual growth. The growth was disconcertingly lifelike. It had hair, though only on an ugly, round swelling at its upper end. It also had eyes set in that same swelling, though they were too close together to be useful. Now and then it moved a little as if it had an agenda at odds with the buckskin’s wishes. Worst of all, it was gorged with blood like any mammal, but its skin was so thin its bodily fluids inflicted themselves upon the senses with unnatural force. What warped mimicry of life was this?

“A deformity!” Talus cried.


“You’re both wrong—it’s a parasite!” Bitterroot exclaimed.
The growth jerked two appendages on either side of its middle. Incredibly, the buckskin turned in response to the jerk and began to circle the monsters as Larkspur circled the mares to adjust their direction when he detected danger. Gradually the stupid, dark-furred creatures lurched into motion, heading downhill in search of grazing land not yet destroyed by their own excess. When the buckskin passed the young mustangs, they saw that his eyes were as dull as those of the animals he was herding. He was dead inside. The growth had killed him but left him on his feet to walk, trot, canter, and gallop, had reduced him to animation without spirit. Only once did he acknowledge the three wild horses. He halted for several seconds, gazing at Talus. There was something familiar about the grulla. He thought he had loved someone like her long ago and for a moment he pictured himself chasing a black mare through paintbrush, the orange petals dazzling against her melanoid coat…

“Spurge,” the buckskin mumbled, “Spurge, slow down. Stay with me.”

The growth tugged on a weird extension of itself that also attached to the buckskin’s mouth. The stallion, his head pulled uncomfortably high, squealed but got back to work. Instantly he forgot the mare, the paintbrush, and the filly who had restored them to him. His world reverted to its previous state: gray, texture-less, and miserable. The growth patted his shoulder.

“That’s it, Buckaroo. Ignore the little cayuses for now. We’ll have our pick of them come roundup. I like that dun colt, though. He’d make a tough cowpony,” the growth said to the buckskin.

Though Talus, Draba, and Bitterroot didn’t understand the deformity’s words, an electrifying realization swept through them. The buckskin was not afflicted with a strange condition. He was being controlled by another, self-sufficient organism. The growth was alive.
and it was independent. Shocked into action, the foals charged pell-mell up the mountain. They
did not think. They only ran. Instinct had completely obliterated their consciousnesses, had swept
away everything but the desire to leave Willow Creek far behind.

Talus checked herself after a headlong mile. Draba nearly crashed into her and Bitterroot
barely managed to dodge the fillies, turning at the last second with impressive sleight of hoof.
Under normal circumstances, the near-accident would have caused an argument between Talus
and Bitterroot. Now neither could be bothered. All three horses gasped and shook as if they had
fevers. As their exhaustion dulled to fatigue, their minds returned to them.

“What was that? How did it get on the stallion’s back?” Talus asked.

“I don’t know, but it did something terrible to him,” Draba said. “His eyes…Everything
beautiful had been removed. Everything good. Everything that makes us mustangs.”

Bitterroot was silent. At length he said, “I would rather be dead than wind up like him. If
anyone ever tries to take my freedom, I’ll fight until my heart bursts.”

Talus and Draba stared at their brother in surprise. They had never thought deeply about
mortality before. Their mothers had explained that every creature must die and often alluded to
long-deceased band members, but death itself had remained a vague threat. It was air thickening
a week in advance of a storm. It was the rangy form of an adolescent mountain lion not yet large
even enough to menace anything bigger than a fawn. It was the edge of a leaf, browning. It was a
wistful fear that inspired contemplation, not reaction. Yet in spite of its nebulousness, the fillies
recognized that it was something ghastly. Bitterroot’s pronouncement that the buckskin’s fate
was worse appalled them. Still, they agreed with him. They wouldn’t have been wild things if
they didn’t.
“Talus,” Draba said suddenly, “the stallion mentioned your mother. How can that be? Has she ever spoken of someone like him?”

The grulla answered, “No, but we don’t talk about the time before she met our father. I guess she could have known the buckskin a while ago.” A familiar disquiet flowed through Talus. She struggled, as she had struggled by the basin, to accept that her dam did not exist for and because of her.

Bitterroot interrupted her thoughts. “We should hurry home. The mares are probably getting worried and Larkspur won’t let them stray to look for us.”

Talus led the way back to the meadow. The sun had set, ushering in the violet hour between dusk and nightfall. Spurge, Milfoil, and Vetch galloped to their offspring the instant the foals trotted through the aspens. Penstemon, Currant, and Larkspur followed at a less urgent pace. The adults’ relief changed to anger as soon as they smelled Willow Creek on the little ones.

“Talus,” Spurge said, “how could you run off like that? And to go to Willow Creek of all places!” The black mare’s voice, bright with anger, struck her daughter like a hoof to the chest; the filly even staggered backward a few paces. Spurge rarely spoke sharply to anyone—her presence alone commanded respect so did not need to resort to harsh words—and had never before scolded Talus in front of the entire band.

The grulla remained silent. She could not justify her actions, but pride kept her from admitting that she was in the wrong. Finally, she said, “Oh, Mother, we were just bored. Nothing bad happened.”

“If nothing bad happened, why are you covered in lather? You’ve been running hard for at least a mile. Were you chased?”

“No. Well, I don’t think so. We didn’t really look back.”
“If they were chased, they might have been followed!” Currant cried. The strawberry roan spun around and would have fled if Penstemon hadn’t bitten her shoulder to jolt her back to reality.

“Listen. Look. Smell the wind,” the old chestnut said. “They clearly haven’t been followed. Even the craftiest humans can’t help but warn us of their approach. Putrid, clumsy fools!”

Spurge added, “Besides, if a human wanted to catch a gaggle of foals, he’d have roped them long before they reached the meadow.” She emphasized “foals” to remind her daughter that she was still of little consequence on the mountain and could not always do as she pleased.

Talus lashed her tail. “A human couldn’t catch me. Nothing can catch me. Wait, what’s a human?”

Vetch stopped prodding Bitterroot with her nose to check for injuries and lifted her head. “What did she say?” the chocolate mare demanded. “Nothing can catch me”? Spurge, you need to discipline your filly. Her attitude puts us all in danger. My Bitterroot wouldn’t have done this without her influence.”

“What’s a human?” Talus repeated.

“Now wait a minute. That’s not fair. Would Talus have gone off by herself if Bitterroot and Draba had refused to go with her? They all deserve a talking-to,” Milfoil said to Vetch. The dunalino glared at her foal. Draba clacked her teeth to show submission, a gesture that usually pacifies an angry horse. This time it had no effect.

“What’s a human?” Talus said once more. Bitterroot and Draba heard her and took up the cry. The adults paused in the middle of their argument and exchanged uncertain glances.

Penstemon said, “They’re not ready yet.”
“They might have to be,” Spurge answered solemnly. She turned to the young mustangs.

“Tell us everything you saw at Willow Creek.”

Talus, sensing that much of the band’s hostility was directed at her, waited for Draba to speak. The flaxen-maned filly understood what was wanted of her and stepped forward.

“First we came upon creatures that stood on four legs and ate grass like us. Only they weren’t like us at all. They were big, black, heavy things. We tried to talk to them, but they didn’t understand. Wouldn’t even exchange breath. And they had destroyed the creek,” Draba said.

Spurge nodded. “Cows. You saw cows. They’re distant cousins of ours.”

“What happened to them? What made them so dumb?” Bitterroot asked.

“It wasn’t one event,” Spurge continued. “When any living being is taken out of the wild, it gets stupid. Not all at once. First it forgets how to read the wind. Then it forgets that it loves the wind. Then it forgets its own name. You could say it starts life over again. As something else. Something less than it was before. And over the years it reproduces and its offspring are also dimwitted.”

For a moment, all the horses were silent. Their sadness had a shape and a weight and a smell. Talus trembled. She didn’t understand what “taken out of the wild” meant because all she knew was the wild, but the thought of growing indifferent to the wind hurt her. Now, when she pictured the monsters—the cows—only pity clawed at her heart. They had suffered a terrible injustice and could not be blamed for their behavior. But what of the buckskin? He had been both dull of spirit and controlled.

Draba must have been wondering the same thing. She waited a second or two to be respectful, then added, “The cows weren’t the worst part. There was a stallion…”
The dunalino trailed off. Talus, she sensed, should take over. After all, the buckskin had been transfixed by the grulla filly, had apparently known her dam.

Talus looked at Draba and began: “A stallion was herding the cows. At least I think that’s what he was doing. Only he wasn’t acting of his own free will. Something on his back directed him. It was alive. He did what it told him to do up until he stopped and stared at me. Like we’d met before but he couldn’t remember where. Except he called me by the wrong name. He called me ‘Spurge.’”

The black mare gazed at her daughter in wonder. She didn’t know any tame horses. “Tell me more about this stallion,” she said. “What color was he?”

“Buckskin. Buckskin with especially dark points. They made his body appear yellow in comparison.”

Spurge, Milfoil, and Larkspur immediately turned to one another.

“That sounds like Finch,” Milfoil said.

“It can’t be. I spoke to an old stud released after the last roundup. He didn’t spot Finch in the pens,” Spurge said. “No, that buckskin is too smart to get himself captured. He probably just left the mountain after you defeated him, Larkspur.”

The dun disagreed. “What other buckskin knows you well enough to see you in Talus? It had to be him. I’m sorry. I wouldn’t wish that fate on anyone, not even a rival. Besides, I respected Finch. He left more scars on this hide of mine than I can count but I’m proud of every one of them.”

“Who’s Finch, Mother?” Talus interrupted.

Spurge said, “The stallion Milfoil and I ran with before Larkspur won us in a terrific fight. He sired your grown brother Bistort.”
“That’s why I’m always on the alert when Bistort’s nearby. Any mustang with the blood of Finch in his veins poses a threat,” Larkspur interjected.

Talus had spied Bistort with his band several weeks before. He was smoky black—obsidian with an amber patina. The hair inside his ears was especially tawny. In the right lighting, it seemed to catch fire. The grulla couldn’t believe that lifeless Finch had fathered such a spirited stallion. She studied her dam, but could not guess how Spurge felt. Mares, she knew, were not particularly attached to their male counterparts, but no horse could live with another for an extended period of time without developing a degree of affection.

Bitterroot, less affected since his mother hadn’t known Finch, changed the subject. “But what was on his back? What was controlling him?”

Spurge glanced at Milfoil and Vetch. A tacit agreement passed between them. Larkspur, Penstemon, and Currant wandered off to give the mares time with their foals. Night pulled the color from the meadow. Spurge and Vetch vanished except for the whites of their eyes, but Milfoil’s coat paled in the moonlight. She almost glowed. Talus, Bitterroot, and Draba thought their parents looked very big and very mysterious.

“We hoped this day wouldn’t come for a while yet,” Spurge said, “but since it has…You’ll just have to cope with what we’re about to tell you as well as you can. The thing you saw on Finch’s back was a human. Humans are animals like us, but they’re not strong enough to survive out here. Their bodies are small, weak, and hairless. Worse, they only have two legs so they can’t get anywhere in a hurry. That’s why they force horses to carry them.”

“Humph!” Talus said. “You can’t force a mustang to do anything.”

Vetch snorted in disgust. Spurge, her anger at Talus dulled by the seriousness of the situation, merely said, “Not all horses are mustangs. Some have never known freedom. They
have always been and will always be like the cows you met this afternoon. Dumb enough to be
to control. Maybe even eager to be controlled. But that doesn’t mean we mustangs have nothing
to fear. Once every few years, humans come for us. They—this is hard to explain. Milfoil, you
watched one of those creatures land when you were young. Maybe you should tell this part.”

The dunalino stopped nuzzling Draba, who had started to shake, and moved so that she
could address each of the foals in turn. “They chase us with what I can only describe as a silver
bird. A bird with wings on top of its body, not on its sides. Wings that spin instead of pump up
and down. Those wings make an awful sound. Sometimes I think that’s why they’re able to
capture us. The noise drives us mad. Drives us out of our senses. Anyway, the humans can go
inside the bird.”

“Inside the bird!” Draba cried. She stepped closer to Talus for comfort.

“Yes,” Milfoil continued. “They pry apart—its ribs, I guess—go inside, and seal the
wound behind them. Then the bird has to do whatever they want. And what they want is to trap
us in a pen, a square of earth surrounded by a hard, shiny substance like the bird’s feathers. So
they send the bird after us and it herds us into a pen that we never see until it’s too late.”

“What then?” Bitterroot asked. Like Draba, he had begun to tremble. Unlike Draba, he
refused to look to his dam for support. The only way to win Vetch’s love was to outgrow it.

Milfoil said, “The humans release some of us and keep the others. We don’t know how
they decide who stays and who goes. We also don’t know what happens to the unlucky ones after
that. Sometimes we encounter past bandmates with humans on their backs, but most often our
former companions are gone forever. Penstemon says they’re either given to humans who live
far away or killed. She’s one of the oldest mares on the mountain, so she knows more than
most.”
Talus could not imagine the bird or the pen—she would not be able to until she had experienced them herself—but she understood how awful life would be without her band. If Currant were gone, whose nervous but joyful energy would keep her on her toes? And what about Penstemon? Could anyone ever replace the gentle old chestnut? Even the absence of Vetch and Bitterroot would pain her. She would miss the sight of them grazing slightly apart from the rest of the group, a little resentful, a little sullen, but so courageous that their faults could not be held against them for long. Perhaps only Larkspur was braver. He, too, had to be there for life to make sense, for the mares to stay together on a mountain also inhabited by stallions like Bistort and Fireweed. But it would be worse to go without Milfoil, who had become an aunt of sorts to Talus, and dear, sweet Draba. Without her dunalino shadow, the grulla would have no constant companion, no one with whom she could share the wonders of growing up.

Still, the filly would sooner lose her entire band than her mother. If a human took Spurge away, it would also strip Mount Mesteño of color and nuance and texture. The brash green of the junipers would fade. So, too, would the sheen on a magpie’s tail, an iridescence that shimmered between blue and violet. In the pool at the center of the basin, the mud would surrender its slickness. In the alpine zone where Talus had been foaled, the petals of the wildflowers would give up their dampness, their wrinkled silk consistency. In the end, the grass would dim and taste like nothing. Like nothingness. Talus trembled at the thought. She hoped that the others could not see her quivering in the darkness until she realized they were all shuddering with the same communal grief.

“Why?” she asked at last. “Why would the humans do this to us? Do they hate us for some reason?”
Vetch, sobered by the discussion, appeared almost gentle. “The humans don’t hate us. We’re just...inconvenient. They want cows and the other animals that serve them to have this land to themselves. We must be removed or reduced in number before that can happen.”

“That’s not fair. That’s not right!” Bitterroot cried, pawing the ground.

“No, but it’s the way things are.”

“We belong here! The cows don’t. They spoil the earth. Everything about them is wrong!”

“I know, my son. I know. Don’t try to find logic in the ways of humans. They don’t think like us. The only thing a mustang can do is accept that life in the wild is not a given. That it must be fought for and won over and over again.”

Bitterroot stared at Talus. Talus stared at Draba. None of the foals could speak.

That night, after the three mares finished talking to their offspring, after the other horses fell asleep one by one, Spurge and Talus stayed awake. Lying side by side with their legs tucked underneath them, they watched the sky lighten from black to blue to gray. The grulla filly sensed disappointment in her dam. Disappointment and an awful sadness.

“Mother,” she said. “Are you still mad at me?”

Spurge said, “No. I just thought you knew better than to run off like that.”

“I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

“Vetch is right, you know. Bitterroot and Draba wouldn’t have gone to Willow Creek on their own. You put yourself and your siblings in danger.”

“I didn’t make them come with me!”

“But you acted knowing they would follow. Don’t deny it. Everyone can see that Bitterroot competes with you and Draba looks up to you.”
“That’s not my fault.”

“You’ll never become a lead mare with that attitude.”

Talus tossed her forelock angrily. For a moment she forgot that life would not be life without Spurge and felt only spite toward the black mare. Perhaps her mother was jealous of her power over Bitterroot and Draba. Perhaps she secretly did not want Talus to outshine her one day. The filly flattened her ears and rose to find a comfortable spot farther away.

“Wait,” Spurge said. “I didn’t mean to be harsh. But you can understand why I want you to fulfill your potential. A great lead mare can keep her band from ending up like Finch. Can keep herself from ending up like him.”

Talus’s resentment faded when she heard her dam’s voice thicken with grief. She lay down next to Spurge again and loved her with the same universe-shifting love she had first experienced in her birth meadow. “Mother,” the grulla asked, “do you miss Finch?”

“Every day. Larkspur was always a little stronger, a little faster. And of course mares want the best stallion to be their protector and the sire of their foals. But Finch had a special fire in him. Milfoil and I admired him for it and were almost sorry to be won by Larkspur. To think that that fire has gone out…I suppose it only lives in Bistort now.”

Talus gazed out across the bunchgrass. In the dim death throes of the night, she could just detect Larkspur sleeping on his feet and hear his shallow breathing. Unlike the mares and foals, he could not allow himself to lose consciousness completely, had to listen and smell and read the vibrations that traveled up his bones even at rest. Finally, the grulla knew why. There was terror in the world.
CHAPTER 5

Talus changed after that night. Long after Bitterroot and Draba had recovered from the shock of their misadventure, she remained deeply affected, even depressed. She went about with her head low and her ears listless. Occasionally she lacked the energy to switch flies from her hindquarters. What was the point? Did anything matter if life was so full of peril? If her freedom and her family could be stolen from her when she least expected it? It seemed better to let sadness dull her senses so the pain of separation would be muted when it came. When, late in the afternoon, the bluebirds commenced their sweet mewing, she would hear nothing but a dry and distant titter. When, early in the morning, a red-tailed hawk snatched a young rabbit in a scrimmage of fur and talon, she would not feel herself pressed against the humming throat of life. She would instead linger in its long, gray, unmissable shadow. Then, if a silver bird ever tore her from Spurge and Draba, Milfoil and Bitterroot, from Mount Mesteño itself, she need not long for any of those things.

Spurge noticed the alteration in Talus. So did Milfoil. Both mares encouraged Draba to entice her sister to play. The little dunalino did her best, nipping, neighing, and running in stops and starts, but she received no response. After a week, she gave up altogether. Sometimes even Bitterroot, though tempted to push Talus around while he could get away with it, would try to engage her in a race or social grooming. The grulla remained sad and aloof. She did not even register her own increasing maturity: she now consumed grass as readily as her mother’s milk, her hide was starting to molt, darkening the hair on her face from raincloud to thunderstorm, and her mane showed signs of lying flat and soft instead of bristling down her neck. All of this
should have brought her an acute joy, should have filled her with a consciousness of her own efficacy.

One day, when autumn had taken control of Mount Mesteño so gradually that the yellowing of the aspen leaves seemed a sudden development, Penstemon called Talus to her. The band had been feeding in the valley where Spurge had first introduced her filly to the others. Now the old chestnut led the grulla up into the juniper belt, a move that didn’t alarm Larkspur since an elderly mare and a foal would hardly be coveted by rival stallions. Talus walked with her head down and her eyes dim. She felt no curiosity or anticipation.

At last the chestnut halted in a gap in the junipers. There was nothing special about the tiny clearing. The cones on the trees that framed it had grown round and blue. Some had tumbled to the rocky soil; a male grouse pecked at them with harried stabs of his bill. In a nearby shrub, a jay released a brittle clatter of notes. Talus glanced at Penstemon with a flicker of her past interest in life. Why were they here of all places?

“This,” Penstemon said, sensing the grulla’s confusion, “is where my son Yarrow died.”

Talus pricked her ears in surprise. When the older mustang did not elaborate, she asked, “What happened to him?”

“My previous band—I used to run with a stallion called Speedwell—was being chased down the mountain by a silver bird. Yarrow had bruised a hoof not long before. A minor injury, as long as he trod carefully for a few days. But, of course, the bird wouldn’t let him do that. It drove us along at a rate too fast for an adult horse, much less a foal.”

Penstemon paused and gathered herself. The grouse plucked a few more cones from the ground, set his wings in order, and heaved himself into the low, noisy flight common to his kind. Talus watched him disappear, then turned back to the old mare.
“The bird forced us out of the aspens and into the junipers at a stiff gallop,” the chestnut continued. “We streamed toward this clearing mad with fear. Yarrow was at my side. I could feel his breath on my shoulder, could hear it snag in his throat as the soreness in his hoof increased. He had reached the limits of his strength. It was only a matter of time before he took a fatal misstep. I slowed to give him a chance to recover. We fell a stride or two behind the rest of the band. I guess the bird—the humans inside it—wanted us to stay together because the great silver creature dipped in my direction to keep me moving at a fast pace. It came so close I thought it was going to strike me. I leaped forward to avoid a blow…”

Penstemon shuddered and shut her eyes. Talus’s heart battered her chest though she already knew how the story would end. She wanted to run away before the mare found her voice again, but there was something hypnotic about the tale.

The chestnut went on. “I leaped forward to avoid a blow and Yarrow tried to go with me. It was too much to ask of his bad hoof. He set it down at an angle to relieve the pressure just as we reached this spot. His leg snapped below the knee. He tumbled head over heels and landed with a thud that didn’t seem loud enough considering how much it changed my life. I don’t know if he got up after that or died where he fell; with that terrible bird behind me, I had no choice but to catch up with my band. It doesn’t matter, anyway. He was doomed regardless. Still, I often wonder what he did next. I hate the thought of him staggering around on three legs. I hope he had the good sense to stay on his side and let death come quietly.”

Talus stared at the hard, dry soil in front of her. For a moment she imagined herself lying in the dirt shattered and alone. How long would it take for her consciousness to disperse like mist in the sun? And would a total lack of sensation truly be an improvement on pain? What was
worse? Agony or oblivion? The grulla shook her head as if to clear it of such awful questions. She was not ready for them yet. She would never be ready for them.

Penstemon hadn’t finished. “The bird didn’t stop chasing us until we had charged right into a pen. It was chaos. Several other bands had also been caught and the stallions immediately began to fight. But I didn’t even notice the ruckus surrounding me. I could only think of poor Yarrow. As soon as the humans released my band—they only held onto two of Speedwell’s yearling sons that year—I returned to the juniper belt to look for my colt. To find his body, really. I was too late. A black bear had dragged his remains away. If I had only been able to see and smell him, to say goodbye, I might have accepted his death. I had lost a foal before and recovered.”

Talus glanced at the old chestnut. Once again, she was surprised by how rich the adults’ lives were compared to hers. By how much she didn’t know and would never know about them. If one of Spurge’s past foals had died tragically, if the beautiful black mare ever nuzzled Talus but longed for a different daughter…The grulla snorted and tossed her forelock. For a second she wished her powers of comprehension were still as limited as they were in her early days, when she believed that the world could not exist without her, had, in fact, appeared fully formed at the instant of her birth.

“Instead,” Penstemon said, “instead I wandered about stupid with grief. Eventually my behavior started to endanger the band. One morning I walked out of a copse of aspens into the line of sight of a human. It was a female human traveling on foot up the mountain, so nothing terrible happened. But Speedwell had had enough. He drove me away as if I were his daughter gone into heat for the first time. I was alone. The most alone I have ever been.”
“A week later, a storm descended on Mount Mesteño. Thunder and lightning roared and crackled all around. Then the rain came in cold, gray sheets. So much fell that the rabbits’ burrows caved in and they dug their way out covered in mud. The moles, mice, and shrews were even worse off; when their tunnels collapsed, water rushed in and drowned them. I could hear them crying out beneath my hooves. But the sky cleared, as it always does. I ventured out to see how much damage the storm had done and to enjoy the smell of wet leaves.

“I hadn’t gone far when I stumbled upon a sad, strange sight: the blackened corpse of a mare from a band that lived just beyond Speedwell’s territory. She sprawled with her legs rigid and flared. Lightning had struck her. I was about to run—the stench overwhelmed me—when I noticed her foal watching me from a spray of shrubbery. It was a filly. A strawberry roan filly about your age. You can probably guess her name.”

“Currant!” Talus cried. She had never asked why the chestnut and the roan were so close. Her respect for the two mares swelled. Neither ever had a cross word for anyone, yet both had suffered enough tragedy to sour the kindest disposition. “But where did the rest of her band go? Did they leave her behind on purpose?”

Penstemon said, “They didn’t have a choice. She wouldn’t leave her mother’s body. Sometimes a band has to sacrifice one of its members. Currant isn’t bitter about that at all. Whenever she encounters an old bandmate, they interact with perfect ease.”

Talus stared. Spurge had often told her that a responsible mustang puts the needs of the group first, but Currant’s acceptance of her abandonment seemed extreme. The grulla could never forgive anyone who had deserted her when she was at her most vulnerable. “Currant is more tolerant than I would be in her place,” she said.
“Yes,” Penstemon agreed. “Yet that’s what drew me to her. Even as a foal robbed of her mother and her band at the same time, she showed no malice toward the world. She maintained her essential goodness. Once I coaxed her out of the shrubbery, she greeted me, if not cheerfully, at least with enough energy to suggest that she hadn’t given up on life. I realized that, if a six-month-old filly had the strength to rise above her dam’s death, I could cope with Yarrow’s. We walked away from the lightning-charred body together and we haven’t been apart since.

“At first, we struggled to survive without the protection of a band. A mountain lion nearly carried off Currant—I turned away for a moment and it grabbed her by the withers—but she managed to twist free. Luck was on our side, though. We met a dun stallion willing to take us into his herd. It was a young Larkspur, of course. At the time, he had only two mares with him, Vetch and a cremello named Buttercup the humans caught before you were born. Your mother and Milfoil joined us after Larkspur defeated Finch about a year later.

“Over the following months, Currant and I grew as close as I had ever been with any of my foals. Maybe closer. And when she came of age, she stayed in the band since Larkspur didn’t sire her. Eventually, I couldn’t imagine life without her. Literally couldn’t believe we hadn’t always been together or would ever be separated. She didn’t replace Yarrow. Then again, he wouldn’t have replaced her if their fates were switched. We’re all unique, and when we die, our friends and family are changed forever. But they do recover. They do find other sources of happiness.

“What I’m saying, Talus, is that you’ll experience loss many times before you’re my age. Yet you’ll see that, no matter what, you’ll find something or someone to love. There is nothing in your future you can’t face and nothing in your present you shouldn’t enjoy to the fullest just because living is tough work.”
Talus’s senses sharpened. She smelled the spice of the juniper leaves and the tartness of their cones and the warm musk the grouse had left behind like a ghost. She heard the sweet, slurry music of windblown aspens in the upper elevations and the angry crackle of sagebrush trampled by pronghorns in the lower. She felt the footfalls of a nearby elk tingling in her hooves and pasterns. She saw, when she turned and gazed downhill, the distant forms of her bandmates. The light on Milfoil’s and Draba’s flaxen manes. The sublime darkness of Spurge’s coat. Larkspur pricking his ears into the wind. Vetch and Currant grazing while Bitterroot circled them, trying to start a game of chase. Suddenly Talus wanted nothing more than to be back in the valley with the horses who had known and nurtured her since the first day of her life.

“Go ahead,” Penstemon said. “Run to them. I’ll catch up.”

Talus nuzzled the chestnut, looked at the spot where Yarrow had broken down so long ago, and galloped out of the clearing. She flew from the junipers to the sagebrush, startling one of the pronghorns she had sensed earlier. When she reached the slope that plunged into the valley, she stopped and neighed joyfully. Draba answered. Talus ran to her. The fillies met in a head-bobbing, tail-swishing flurry of young limbs. Bitterroot rushed over. Then the youngsters cantered around the adults, caught their breath, rolled in the grass, and rose to repeat the process. Talus’s heart grew within her, swollen with love. For the first time since her visit to Willow Creek, she didn’t want to be anyone or anywhere else.

In the late afternoon, the mustangs made their way to the basin to drink. With Larkspur trotting after them like a living shadow, the mares and foals traveled in pairs: Spurge and Talus, Vetch and Bitterroot, Milfoil and Draba, Penstemon and Currant.
Autumn faded as winter approached. Snow started to accumulate on the summit once again. The alpine meadows just below shimmered with dew well into the morning and the aspen groves farther down fell silent as the trees shed their leaves. Even the junipers and sagebrush above the valley lost a little of their vigor. When the horses woke to find the bunchgrass stilled by frost, Spurge decided that it was time to move the band to the foothills of Mount Mesteño, where the cold would be less intense. Talus and the other foals welcomed the change, but the adults seemed nervous. As the band descended the mountain, the three young mustangs understood why.

Not long after Spurge led the group out of the valley, a familiar smell widened Talus’s nostrils. A pungent but alluring odor. She propped in alarm—and excitement. Bitterroot bumped into her from behind and would have picked a fight if he hadn’t also detected the scent. One by one, the band members whiffed the air and stiffened.

“Mother,” Talus said, “is that Fireweed?”

Spurge said, “Yes. Rimrock and Greasewood are with him. We’re not the only horses heading for the foothills.”

“Will Larkspur have to defend us again?”

“I hope not, but tensions are always high when bands have to share the same part of the mountain.”

Talus wanted to confer with Draba—she and the dunalino had started to feel odd stirrings when they encountered males besides Larkspur and Bitterroot—but Spurge kept walking. A few minutes later, the grulla spotted Fireweed, Rimrock, and Greasewood in the distance. The red
dun paused, stared in their direction, and jogged on with his fellow bachelors flanking him.

Apparenty he didn’t crave a second bout with Larkspur. Still, there were other stallions to worry about; a faint whinnying from the west revealed that Bistort and his mares had also begun their trek down Mount Mesteño. Talus shivered with anticipation. Now that she had seen his father, she wanted to get a close look at the smoky black with the fiery ears. She also hoped to gauge Spurge’s reaction to a grown foal; the grulla’s increasing awareness of her own march toward adulthood had made her wonder how her relationship with her dam would evolve once she belonged to another band.

As the mustangs picked their way down the mountain, the land took on a different character. The junipers disappeared except for the occasional tree clinging to life amid fissured rock. Even the sagebrush changed. Small and soil-hugging in the high places, it sprawled and spread in an almost extravagant fashion. Yet the flattening of the earth alarmed Talus most.

Level ground had always been a luxury, a wonderful sense of stability found only in the meadows and valleys that interrupted the craggy face of Mount Mesteño. But sustained even terrain left her feeling exposed. Forced her to experience too much. She pressed against Spurge but the mare pinned her ears. The grulla snorted in resentment. Over the past few weeks her mother had shown less tolerance for needy behavior. Milfoil and Vetch had done the same with Draba and Bitterroot.

At last the band reached its destination: a broad expanse of sagebrush scrub punctuated by an intensely blue spring. Fireweed, Rimrock, and Greasewood had arrived first and were sucking up water greedily. Larkspur shrilled a challenge, warning the three young studs to clear out. They obeyed but Fireweed halted for a moment to study his rival as though calculating how much more growing he had to do before he could launch a successful attack. Talus noticed that
the red dun had collected several new battle scars since the previous encounter. They increased the grulla’s admiration. One, a diagonal slash across his left shoulder, had hardened into a smooth purple welt. It sat there proudly on his clay-colored coat, a tributary of raised flesh, a testament to courage.

Almost as soon as Fireweed and his companions retreated, Bistort and his mares announced themselves with ringing neighs. A silver buckskin—dirty white with a dark mane and tail—pranced at the head of the group. Her back dipped with age and a past injury had reduced one of her hocks to a gall-like swelling, but she moved with a dynamic, high-stepping fluidity. Immediately Talus forgot the bachelors and even her older brother. Who was this spectacular animal? Could she be the equal, perhaps the better, of Spurge?

The silver mare stopped. So did the horses behind her with the exception of Bistort. He swung out from behind his band to confront Larkspur. The two stallions faced each other with their necks arched and their tails raised. Talus studied her brother and father. Bistort’s amber undertones glowed in the bright pre-winter sunlight. For a moment it seemed a chestnut—or maybe Finch’s fire—was trying to push through his black hide. Larkspur could not compete with this son of Spurge in terms of beauty. But power and speed mattered more than good looks. The dun had the advantage there. Though Bistort, unlike Fireweed, was fully developed, he had a narrow chest, barrel, and hindquarters. Larkspur, in comparison, could barely contain his own power. His muscles strained against his hoof-pocked, tooth-raked coat and his wide girth and well-sprung ribs suggested that an enormous heart and an equally impressive set of lungs pulsed within him. This was a body that would not tire long after others sagged with exhaustion. Talus looked at her mother, hoping to deduce her allegiance, but the dark mare’s eyes glowed with intelligence, not emotion. She was analyzing the males’ physical attributes as if she had no
connection to either of them. The grulla, unsettled, wondered if Spurge would one day consider her, too, just another horse to be categorized as a threat, ally, or non-factor based on her size and athleticism.

Bistort and Larkspur began the flank-sniffing ritual Talus had first seen at the basin. After a moment they parted, offered each other their muzzles, and exchanged breath. Bistort’s ears immediately swiveled backward while Larkspur’s flicked upright. The smoky black had sensed his inferiority in the hot, forceful gust of air his adversary had blown into his nostrils. No fight this time. Talus heard Vetch exhale behind her. The chocolate mare’s relief was apparently shared by the other adults—the sour odor of anxiety dropped away from their hides, replaced by the stale but less intense smell of mere tension. Talus felt strangely disappointed. If his snort was any indication, Bitterroot echoed her sentiment. Timid Draba probably hoped the conflict would end as soon as possible even though a stallion battle would give her further opportunity to explore her increasing interest in the opposite sex. Sometimes Talus worried about her dunalino half-sister. The filly was so easily crushed by the world.

Bistort backpedaled slowly, then wheeled and returned to his band. “Aster,” he said to the silver buckskin, “we’ll wait our turn to drink.”

Aster led the band away. Bistort followed, but paused as he passed Spurge and Talus. His gaze roved from his mother to the foal at her side. The grulla looked into his eyes with as much boldness as she could muster. She meant to claim Spurge for herself. Yet deep down she recognized that her dam had already started to erect a distance between them, that she was being shunted toward independence more quickly than she wanted.
Bistort must have guessed her thoughts. He laughed and said to Spurge, “Larkspur had to give you a grulla sooner or later with that dun coat of his. She seems promising, but she’s a bit dependent on you for a six-month-old, isn’t she?”

“She’ll be weaned by spring,” Spurge said coolly, a little amused by the subtle friction between her offspring. “I have another foal on the way, so she won’t be coddled and allowed to nurse until she turns one like you.”

Bistort switched his tail in mock irritation. “All right, Mother. All right,” he said. The smoky black joined his mares, who had retreated about a hundred feet to graze until Larkspur’s band had finished with the spring. Fireweed, Rimrock, and Greasewood stood even farther off. A pecking order had been established without bloodshed. While coexisting in the sagebrush scrub at the base of Mount Mesteño during the cold months ahead, Larkspur and his family would water first, then yield the area to Bistort and his companions. Finally, the three bachelors could have their fill.

Bitterroot and Draba spent the rest of the day playing, but Talus was too fascinated by the other bands to engage in anything so frivolous. She stared at Aster, whose hide, the color of trodden snow, made her stand out among the browns and greens of the foothills. How many adventures had the silver buckskin gone on over the course of her long life? She stared at Bistort with his coppery highlights and wished she were as lovely until she remembered that strength was the greater gift. She stared at Fireweed, already rugged at four, and wondered whether he would win his own mares in the near future, whether she would run with him or someone she hadn’t even met yet when she matured. She stared at Spurge and pictured the life she now knew was unfurling inside the same womb that had borne her. High on Mount Mesteño, where the bighorn sheep huddled together in the slopes that had given the filly her name, an icy wind began
its invisible journey downhill. A few minutes later, its approach betrayed by the rustling of the
scrub, it blew between Talus’s ears, across her back, and through her tail. She shivered.

Everything was changing.
Snow tumbled earthward like chilled white dust motes, collecting in glittering drifts in the alpine zone and powdering the foothills. In the sagebrush scrub where the mustangs wintered, ice skinned the spring and hardened the shrubbery. When the wind blew, the landscape itself seemed to tinkle and sometimes snap with cold. Even the air took on a different quality—winter had stripped it down to its essentials, to its pure, sharp quick. For many animals, the weather proved deadly. Birds that hadn’t gone south died midflight or in their sleep, their heads tucked under their wings for safekeeping. Pronghorns injured in the fall rut curled up in drifts and waited for the next flurry to efface them. Thirsty coyotes bled to death after licking the jagged edges of frozen ponds for moisture and slicing open their tongues. Frost inched into the burrows of mice, killing underground. Occasionally the soil cracked and coughed up their bodies: toffee-colored fluff glazed with rime. Beauty and suffering, it seemed, walked side by side.

Talus and her bandmates worked hard for their food. They pawed through snow to reach the wheatgrass that grew among the sagebrush, eating constantly to boost their strength. Water, too, was difficult to obtain. The heavier individuals like Larkspur and Vetch had to stand on the solid, gray-blue spring until its surface fissured before the others could widen the slits with their hooves and drink. Yet the horses fared better than all but the bighorn sheep, who strangely appeared to grow more alive as conditions worsened. Their success lay in their active lifestyle and their winter coats. Spurge kept them moving most of the day, often encouraging the young ones to roughhouse though only a month earlier she had disapproved of Talus’s juvenile behavior. When the mustangs had to rest, they gathered together, placed their heads on one another’s necks, and exchanged body heat through thick, fleece-like fur. If a blizzard struck, they
closed their eyes but leaned against their companions, never alone even after the world winked out.

The more the mustangs had to focus on survival, the less they worried about mingling with other bands. One morning Bistort’s party approached the spring before Larkspur’s had cleared out, but the two stallions allowed their mares and foals to mix. They had apparently agreed not to steal each other’s mates as long as they were sharing the same territory. Talus welcomed the temporary truce—she wanted to see the silver buckskin up close to compare her to Spurge. But a blue roan son of Bistort immediately singled out the grulla filly as a playmate. Just as she stepped toward Aster, awed by the mare’s obvious speed and power, the colt pranced into her path. Talus tried to skirt him. He blocked her way.

“What are you doing? Let me pass,” Talus demanded.

“You’re Talus, Spurge’s daughter, right? I’m Lupine, Thistle’s son,” the stranger said, indicating his dam, also a blue roan. “I’ve heard you’re the most promising foal on the mountain, but Bistort says I’m the finest colt he’s ever sired. Let’s race to find out who’s really best.”

The grulla studied her self-declared rival. He had a muscular, well-balanced physique and long, sturdy legs. Under different circumstances, she would have accepted his challenge. But Talus could see Spurge and Aster sniffing in a less intense version of a stallion confrontation. Larkspur’s and Bistort’s temporary peace did not extend to the mares; they still had to sort out a pecking order before they could relax. Beyond the two leaders, the rank-and-file females engaged in similar rituals. Vetch, predictably, had already asserted herself as the top horse outside of Spurge and Aster. Milfoil, Currant, and Penstemon would have a more difficult time establishing their positions in the group. Though these olfactory struggles never exploded into combat, they were just as exciting as skirmishes between males. Talus wasn’t about to miss them.
to indulge an aggressive colt. Besides, though the Willow Creek debacle had humbled her to a degree, it had not diminished her high opinion of herself. No foal, she thought, was her equal or near-equal and therefore had to be put in his place.

“Sorry. I’m too busy right now. Maybe you can play with the other foals in my band,” Talus said. She pushed past Lupine, but he trotted in front of her again.

The blue roan snapped, “What? You mean the dun and the dunalino? I’m not interested in them. The colt is slow and the filly is too submissive to be any fun.”

Talus glanced at Bitterroot and Draba. Her brother was being outfooted by another of Bistort’s sons while her sister timidly greeted the smoky black’s lone daughter. They did appear unimpressive once their flaws had been pointed out. The grulla tinged with an odd mixture of tenderness and shame when she looked at them. She resented Lupine for making her feel that way. But she couldn’t linger to settle the score; Spurge and Aster, unable to determine who was dominant through a simple flank-smelling, had resorted to snorting into each other’s nostrils. Someone had to yield, if only to break the stalemate.

“Too bad,” Talus said. She dropped her shoulder and shoved Lupine aside. The filly trotted toward her mother and the silver buckskin. At that moment, two things happened at once. Spurge surrendered to Aster, retreating to allow the older mare to graze on the greenest patch of exposed grass, and Lupine galloped up behind Talus and bit her on the hindquarters with enough force to draw blood. The grulla squealed, half shocked by her dam’s capitulation, half enraged by the hot ooze on her rump. She rounded on Lupine with her lips peeled and her ears pinned so dramatically that they disappeared into her mane. But the blue roan lowered his head and swung it at her repeatedly just as grown stallions herd grown mares. Talus swerved and ran off through
the scrub; she and Lupine would test one another in a chase reminiscent of Spurge’s flight from the bachelors in the heady days of summer.

The filly leaped a clump of sagebrush but landed so lightly she didn’t mire herself in the drift on the opposite side. A jingle followed by a thud told her that Lupine had rapped the ice-draped foliage with a rear hoof and fallen. She slowed to let him catch up only to pull away again. Once more she heard the colt tumble. It occurred to her that Lupine, a large foal, couldn’t race across the snow without breaking through to its denser, fluffier layers while she merely sank in to her fetlocks. She changed direction and swooped toward particularly treacherous ground. Lupine followed, slipping and crashing through frostbound vegetation. Talus decreased her pace slightly to encourage the colt. His breath warmed her hip. He lunged at her. She quickened. Lupine missed her by the silky tip of her tail, plunged into the snow, and struggled upright gasping for breath.

Talus swept her ears forward joyfully and galloped back across the scrub. She eased to a walk when she reached the cluster of horses by the spring. Aster and Spurge studied her with bright-eyed, approving expressions. The grulla approached the two mares, a proud arch in her neck. Had they seen how she had outsmarted Lupine? Could they have done the same at her age?

Aster glanced at Spurge—now that the silver buckskin and the black knew where they stood in relation to one another, they were on good terms—and said, “Your daughter is quick and cunning for a foal. The colt she outmaneuvered is our strongest, swiftest young one.”

“Yes,” Spurge said, “I hope she leads her own band someday. But as long as she grows into a responsible, sensible horse, I’ll be satisfied. Come here, Talus. Let me clean that bite.”

The filly trotted over to her dam. Spurge began to lick away the blood, which had coagulated into a tepid red jelly. Talus listened to the lapping of her mother’s tongue and felt a
brief stab of pain in the midst of her euphoria at being called “quick” and “cunning.” She had never detected weakness in Spurge before. To watch the mustang she had idolized since she entered the world cede dominance to another threatened, saddened, and confused her. Yet Spurge did not seem upset in the slightest. Talus could not have borne a loss of status, even one that lasted only while different bands mixed, with equanimity. Why would a mare as spirited as Spurge tolerate such humiliation? She decided to ask her dam why she had surrendered later.

“It’s only a little cut,” Spurge said after removing the last of the blood. “Off you go, Talus. Bitterroot and Draba probably want you to play with them.”

The grulla didn’t move. After having to put Lupine in his place just to observe Aster, she wasn’t about to leave. “I’d rather stay here,” she said.

“No, you don’t. Run along.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Talus, Aster and I have to talk.”

“I’ll be quiet.”

“We have to talk about matters that don’t concern you.”

Talus whipped her tail from side to side, her happiness rushing from her like air after a blow to the stomach. She considered herself old enough to be included in any conversation. Besides, now that she knew about humans, nothing could shock or disturb her. Anger swelled in her gut. Spurge had no right to treat her like a month-old suckling, not in front of a horse as magnificent as the silver buckskin.

“Talus,” Aster said kindly, “listen to your mother. We have a few things to discuss lead mare to lead mare. Go practice running and jumping with your friends and maybe you’ll also be a high-ranking mustang in a few years.”
The grulla looked Aster in the face. Ringed in gray skin and densely lashed, the older horse’s eyes glowed with a gentle brown light. Though Talus resented the patronizing tone in Aster’s voice, she couldn’t bring herself to talk back to someone with so much quiet authority. She rejoined the rest of the foals reluctantly.

Bitterroot, Draba, and their two new companions had finished romping and stood drinking from a hole in the ice that one of the adults had widened for them. Before Talus could be introduced to Bistort’s other offspring, Lupine cantered up to her. Snow still dusted his forelock. The grulla noticed that his coat, blue thanks to the white hairs that mixed with his black base color, already sported scars. They resembled the footprints of birds but had been caused by the teeth and hooves of other colts. It appeared Lupine regularly stirred up trouble.

“What do you want now?” Talus said.

Lupine answered, “A rematch. You tricked me. It wasn’t fair.”

“Yes, it was. Stallions have strength, but mares have smarts. You used your talents, I used mine, and you lost.”

Lupine couldn’t come up with a counterargument. Instead, he said, “You think you’re special just because you’re Spurge’s daughter. Guess what? Your mother’s not the top mare on the mountain and you won’t be either.”

Bitterroot and Draba cranked up their heads in surprise. They hadn’t realized Spurge had relented to Aster. Talus glanced at her dam, whose ears pointed backward to indicate deference as she spoke to the silver buckskin, and turned back to her siblings, daring them to say something belittling. But the tension in their bodies revealed that they, too, didn’t want the social hierarchy that lent so much order to their lives to be upended. Vetch and Milfoil could also lose status, after all.
“My mother,” Talus said, “is a great mare. Everyone knows of her and respects her. I hadn’t heard of your dam until today, though. What did you call her? Tansy? Or was it Tuber? I remember not being very impressed.”

“Thistle! Her name is Thistle. She’s Bistort’s favorite mare and she outranks everyone but Aster in our band.”

“Our second-best mare, Vetch, is tougher. If Larkspur stole your mother, she wouldn’t have any privileges in our group. She’d be just another horse.”

“Talus,” Draba said, her voice a warning. The grulla eyeballed her sister but continued to punish Lupine for insulting Spurge. Cruelty quickened her heartbeat and opened her chest. She had never enjoyed upsetting anyone before, not even Bitterroot, but taunting the blue roan liberated her, chased away the insecurities that had accompanied her dam’s “defeat.”

“My father wouldn’t let yours take my mother,” Lupine said, advancing with his head so low that his withers formed a point. His forelock shrouded the left half of his face, making him appear even more combative. Talus sensed it was unwise to bait him, but didn’t want to cut her fun short.

The grulla said, “Your father wouldn’t be able to do anything about it if Larkspur wanted your whole band. Bistort is a nice stallion—he’d have to be with Spurge’s blood—but he’s no match for my sire. That red dun bachelor Fireweed might overtake him by this time next year, too. I wouldn’t count on having any status on this mountain much longer if I were you, Lupine.”

The colt squealed and charged Talus. She wheeled, doubled, and dodged, avoiding his small, hard hooves. Though she could outpace him, adrenaline rushed through her in queasy waves, brightening the ice on the sagebrush from white to a star-like silver. Stallions were not supposed to attack mares; males and females only fought each other if the safety of a bandmate
was at stake. Foals abided by this rule, too. Yet here was Lupine, racing after her with intent to harm. Her peripheral vision picked up a yellow and two bay flashes—Draba and Bistort’s friendlier offspring had run for help.

Suddenly Lupine grunted and checked himself. Talus stopped, too. She looked behind her to see the blue roan whirling toward Bitterroot. The dun, it seemed, had slammed into Lupine.

“You can’t fight a filly,” Bitterroot said indignantly.

Lupine paused and gazed at Talus as if realizing he had nearly crossed an unspoken line. Then his attention shifted to Bitterroot. “I can fight you,” he said.

Draba whinnied. Lupine, Talus, and Bitterroot swung around to see the dunalino filly leading several mares in their direction. Vetch was among them. Talus studied her half-brother. Bitterroot’s ears, previously flattened, rotated forward to point at his dam. The grulla’s breath shortened. He wouldn’t dare walk away from a challenge in front of his mother. But the stocky son of Larkspur couldn’t compete with Lupine.

Talus said, “Bitterroot, he’s not worth it. Let’s go dig for more grass.”

Bitterroot ignored her. He faced Lupine with his neck bowed and his tail lifted. With his chin drawn to his chest, he called to mind a stag preparing to charge. For an instant he might have been an immature Larkspur, fierce, proud, and exhilarated by his youth, his coat not yet scuffed by battle. But as soon as Lupine also squared up, pausing to churn the air with his right hoof to broadcast his aggression, the illusion fell away. Compared to the blue roan, Bitterroot appeared earthbound and undeveloped.

“Come on, Bitterroot,” Talus repeated. When the colt did not respond, she neighed at the oncoming mares. Vetch broke into a canter, but her strides were not clipped by tension. She
wanted to see her son tested. The grulla had no choice but to watch the dun and the blue roan approach each other menacingly. She was fascinated and terrified at the same time.

Bitterroot and Lupine rushed one another. At first, they feinted and described a circle in the snow, kicking up so much loose white powder they seemed pursued by their own spirits. Then the real struggle began. Lupine braked in the middle of the wild revolution and lashed out with his hind feet. Bitterroot threw back his head to avoid a blow to the eyes or nose, but his rival caught him in the throat. He bellowed in pain. Lupine spun around and slowed to a mincing trot, waiting for the opportunity to land a second hit. Before he could, Bitterroot pitched back onto his rear legs. The move showed more wherewithal than Talus thought her brother possessed—a heavyset horse without much agility had to turn his scrapes into contests of force to stand a chance. Lupine snorted in exasperation yet accepted the new terms, rising as well. Like Larkspur and Fireweed six months earlier, they jabbed with their front hooves, grasped with their forearms, and leaned with all their might. For several seconds, Bitterroot remained competitive, his muscular frame compensating for his inexperience. But gradually Lupine asserted himself. At last he heaved Bitterroot onto his side. The dun swept his limbs across the snow, trying to scramble upright before the blue roan could batter him where he lay.

“Vetch!” Talus cried. “Vetch, do something!” Skirmishes between foals were not supposed to escalate to true viciousness. The chocolate mare simply stared at her son with her nostrils dilated—an expression associated with disgusting smells such as the sour-sweet reek of decay. In the end, Milfoil had to split up the colts. The dunalino flew at Lupine as he gathered himself to strike Bitterroot.

“That’s enough!” Milfoil said, herding the blue roan away.
Lupine’s dam Thistle said, “Don’t you discipline my foal, Milfoil. You can’t get away with whatever you want just because you’re Spurge’s friend.”

“Then teach him some manners. I don’t know how you do things in your band, but we don’t let our colts rough up fillies or fight as savagely as stallions. It’s not natural.”

Thistle tossed her forelock with a dismissive air. “Let’s go, Lupine. You wouldn’t have fun playing with such coddled foals, anyway.”

The two walked off with their heads high and their ears up; the dams of Bistort’s other young ones followed, leaving Vetch, Milfoil, Talus, Bitterroot, and Draba alone. The dun colt managed to stand. He shook snow from his coat.

“Are you all right?” Draba asked. She stepped toward him to examine his throat.

Bitterroot sashayed away. “I’m fine! And I didn’t need help, either. It may not have looked like it, but I was in complete control. I meant to fall. It was part of my plan.”

“You’re not fooling anyone, Bitterroot,” Vetch said, her repulsion replaced by a cold, calm anger. “Lupine had your measure from the beginning.”

Milfoil regarded Bitterroot and said, “I don’t know about that. I thought your son gave a good account of himself. I’d be proud if I were you.”

“With my blood and Larkspur’s, he should have been more competitive.”

“Mother,” Bitterroot interrupted, “I did my best.”

Vetch gazed at her colt. Snow started to flutter down from the sky. The flakes snagged in the chocolate mare’s mane, forming miniature constellations in her dark hair. “Your best is not enough. At this rate, you’ll never be a band stallion. I was stupid to expect great things of you,” she said at length.
Bitterroot seemed to grow smaller. He turned away slowly, as if he were old and movement had become a chore. Talus and Draba exchanged concerned glances. Vetch stalked back to the rest of the adults. Milfoil hesitated, pinned her ears, and trotted after her bandmate. The wind carried the dunalino’s voice to the foals: “How could you say that to your colt?”

Talus approached Bitterroot with tentative strides. “Don’t worry,” she said. “You’ll be stronger and quicker next time someone challenges you. Your mother will change her tune then.”

The dun glared at her. “This is your fault, Talus.”

“My fault? How is it my fault?”

“You wouldn’t leave Lupine alone. Draba warned you, but you wouldn’t stop taunting him.”

“How was I supposed to know he was going to take out his anger on you? Besides, he insulted Spurge. I couldn’t let that stand.”

“Yes, you could. You had already outrun him. You were on top. That should have been enough. But you had to get me involved.”

“You got yourself involved!”

“To protect you!”

Draba placed herself between her siblings and glared at them with such uncharacteristic ferocity that both fell silent. “Quit arguing,” she said. “Bitterroot, I know you’re upset, but you can’t pin everything on Talus. She didn’t make you fight Lupine. She even discouraged you. Talus, you shouldn’t have annoyed Lupine. You could tell upsetting him would end badly. Admit it.”

Talus switched her tail. “No. I won’t. I did nothing wrong.”

“If you don’t apologize, I won’t speak to you ever again,” Bitterroot said.
The grulla stared at her brother. She weighed the friction that had always plagued their relationship against the staunch love the foals had felt for each other on their way to Willow Creek, and, more recently, when she had emerged from her depression. For a moment she recognized that all the petty arguments she had had with Bitterroot over the course of their lives did not matter compared to the intense bursts of affection that seized them when push came to shove. But her pride quickly smothered that realization. “I refuse to say sorry for defending my mother’s honor,” she said. “If I could relive this day, I’d do everything the same.”

“Then we’re not friends anymore.”

“That’s fine with me.”

The dun colt and the grulla filly stormed off in opposite directions. Draba looked from one to the other. After a moment, she followed Talus.

“Why won’t you apologize?” the dunalino asked.

“It’s not my fault he lost or that nothing he does is good enough for Vetch,” Talus snapped.

“Maybe not, but you could have taken a little responsibility to make him feel better. You did work Lupine into a rage.”

“Leave me alone. Can’t you tell when you’re not wanted?”

Talus regretted her words instantly. She couldn’t remember the last time she had been rude to Draba. Judging from her reaction, the dunalino couldn’t, either. The timid filly propped as if she had heard the rasp of a snake’s scales against stone or some other startling sound. Talus, pained, ran away through the now rapidly falling snow.
Spurge’s dark form materialized in front of the grulla. Flakes stippled the mare’s coat and silvered her mane. For a moment Talus thought her mother was not a horse but an ancient creature born of winter.

“There you are,” Spurge said, her voice tender. “I found a patch of especially fine grass south of the spring. Let’s go enjoy it, just you and me.”

Mare and foal picked their way past the spring to the grass Spurge had uncovered, blinking as snow zinged into their faces and melted in their eyes. When they reached the right spot, Talus ate greedily. The day’s excitement had increased her appetite.

“Aster was very impressed with you,” Spurge said.

Talus lifted her head, finished chewing, swallowed, and said, “What did she say after I left?”

“She called you the most athletic filly the mountain has seen since I was young.”

The grulla gazed at her dam, trying to imagine her small and wobble-legged without success. “Really?”

“Yes. Except I disagreed.”

“Oh.” Talus’s ears lost their prick.

“I told Aster you’re much faster than I was at your age.”

Talus glowed from within. The two mustangs cropped grass side by side in perfect contentment for a few minutes. Then the grulla grew troubled again.

“Mother, why did you give in to Aster?” she asked.

Spurge stopped feeding and studied her daughter. “Did that bother you?”

“No. Well, sort of. I was surprised. I had no idea there was another mare on Mount Mesteño swifter or stronger than you.”
“I didn’t back down because I thought Aster could outrun or outmuscle me. In fact, now that she’s old, I’m almost certainly superior. But when we exchanged breath, I smelled places I’ve never been to and horses I’ve never met. And I knew that, if danger struck while our bands were joined, we’d have a better chance to escape with the most experienced mare as leader."

“I wouldn’t have relented. I wouldn’t have wanted anyone to think I’m weak.”

Spurge laughed. “It isn’t weak to do what’s best for the group. It would be weak to care only about yourself.”

Talus pictured Bitterroot standing alone in the snow, quietly turning white as more and more flakes gathered in the swale along his spine. Her stomach fluttered with guilt. She had cared only about herself when she refused to apologize. But she didn’t feel that made her weak. Insensitive, perhaps, but not weak. She would be the last filly to do anything weak.

Spurge must have sensed Talus’s discomfort. “I heard Bitterroot scuffled with the same blue roan colt you ran ragged. Is he okay?”

The grulla pretended to be more interested in grazing than her brother. She took another bite before she said, “I guess so. The blue roan, Lupine, kicked him in the throat, but not hard enough to break the skin.”

“Milfoil said Vetch was cruel to him.”

“Why is she so mean?”

Spurge pawed aside some of the fresh snow so they could continue to browse. “I suspect she had a bad temperament from the beginning. But she also hated it when Milfoil and I joined the band.”

“Because you became the lead mare?”
“Partly. There were other factors, though. Larkspur won Vetch when he was still a bachelor roaming around with a bunch of ragtag colts. She was loyal to him even when he had no status on Mount Mesteño. It hurt her that, after she had waited for him to rise to prominence, another mare usurped her as his co-leader and closest associate. If she hadn’t been through so much with Larkspur before I arrived, she wouldn’t have reacted to her loss of rank quite as badly.”

“That’s not Bitterroot’s fault. Why is she always mad at him?”

“I suspect she thinks producing a future band stallion will win her favor with Larkspur. Whenever Bitterroot shows signs of being just an ordinary colt, she gets angry.”

Talus considered this new information. She pitied Vetch for being supplanted as top mare in the band she had watched grow. She pitied Bitterroot for inheriting his mother’s unhappiness. But most of all she hated that herd life could cause such spite. Draba’s slight, pale frame flickered into her mind’s eye. Did horses with no shot at attaining prestigious positions struggle to define their worth? Or, unhindered by ambition, were they better able to enjoy the simple pleasures of Mount Mesteño? Talus suddenly longed to be average, to exult over the give of grass under her hooves or the air-shredding cry of a hawk or the rich, complex smell of soil after a heavy rain without the stress of proving herself. Then she remembered the guilty, lung-expanding joy that had filled her while she lorded it over Lupine and knew that she would never be happy if her talents went unacknowledged.

“Well,” Spurge said, interrupting her daughter’s reverie, “we should return to the herd. The snowfall is only going to increase. I’d rather wait it out with Milfoil and Draba, wouldn’t you?”
Talus signaled agreement with the turn of an ear, but secretly dreaded a second confrontation with her sister. She accompanied her dam anyway. When Spurge reached Milfoil, the two mares rested their heads on each other’s withers and shuddered with delight as their body heat mingled. Talus and Draba copied their mothers. The grulla felt the dunalino’s muscles stiffen against hers—there was still tension between them. Several minutes passed before they relaxed. Draba drifted off to sleep, snoring softly. Affection bloomed inside Talus. It rose from her gut to her windpipe, cutting off her breath in a surge of emotion. She promised herself not to be cruel to the little dunalino ever again.

Talus’s eyes moved in and out of focus as she tired. Beyond Spurge and Milfoil, obscured by the storm, the rest of the mustangs loomed, then disappeared, loomed, then disappeared. Periodically the wind subsided and the grulla spied Bistort’s mares or Penstemon, Currant, and Vetch huddled together for warmth. Once Larkspur appeared, driving Bitterroot back to the group. The colt stubbornly refused to return to his dam. She just as stubbornly refused to nicker for him. In the end, Bitterroot skirted Vetch and pressed against Penstemon. When the snow thickened and blotted out everyone, Talus thought of the forbidden conversation between Spurge and Aster. What was too terrible to be spoken of in front of her? Hadn’t she already lost her innocence at Willow Creek? The grulla suppressed her worries, drew comfort from Draba’s scent, a hot, living musk in the midst of the keen but neutral cold, and began to dream.
CHAPTER 8

Talus woke to hardship. The snow had stopped falling, but it had buried the sagebrush scrub in many more inches of dense powder. Even the spring was covered—the grulla imagined that a larger-than-life albino stallion had sloughed his ashen coat and draped it across the ice. Now the horses would have to dig for hours for every mouthful of dry, winterkilled grass and every swallow of frigid water. Talus’s ears drooped with disappointment. She glanced at Draba. The dunalino stood motionless, too defeated to toss her flaxen forelock from her eyes or shake off the frost that had collected on her back overnight. Milfoil nuzzled her daughter but looked at Spurge with concern. It was clear the adults were troubled.

Larkspur waded through the snow to the mares. “Spurge,” he said, “shall I run off Bistort and his band? In this weather, we won’t want to share a single blade of grass.”

Spurge gazed at her smoky black son. Bistort, aware that his truce with Larkspur was in jeopardy, had gathered his own mates. “Wait a while. I have a matter to settle with Aster.”

Talus, nibbling at the exposed crown of a shrub not far away, tensed with excitement. She looked around for Draba and Bitterroot. The grulla still needed to tell them about her suspicion that the two leaders had a secret. Then she remembered that only the day before she had spoken sharply to Draba and destroyed her relationship with Bitterroot. The previous afternoon’s events returned to her in vivid detail. Guilt lanced through her.

It vanished when Spurge whinnied at Aster. Talus watched as the black and the silver buckskin met midway between their bands and moved off together. After a moment she noticed Vetch staring, too. The filly approached tentatively, the brown mare’s open-nostriled expression of disgust fresh in her mind.
“What are they worried about?” Talus asked.

Vetch turned one ear toward the grulla to acknowledge her yet continued to glare at Spurge and Aster. “I don’t know. Has your mother seemed preoccupied lately?”

“No. Except she made me leave when she and Aster had something ‘serious’ to discuss.”

“Well, why don’t you eavesdrop?”

Talus lifted her head in surprise. An adult had never encouraged her to engage in questionable behavior before. Plus, there was a sly gleam in Vetch’s eyes. The grulla wondered if the older horse was trying to manipulate her into obtaining information they both craved. Talus snorted in annoyance. Still, she might as well satisfy her curiosity. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to listen in for a few minutes.”

Talus slogged through the white scrubland in the direction of the mares. She paused every three to four meters to paw as if digging for food. When the wind shifted, blowing the filly’s mane on end, she heard Spurge’s voice clearly: “Are you sure? Couldn’t it have been something else? Ice rupturing on one of the streams in the clay barrens? That makes a popping noise, too.”

“No,” Aster replied. “I’d recognize the sound of human tools anywhere. Besides, the spring thaw won’t begin for another month at the soonest.”

“But why build a pen in the middle of winter? Surely the humans wouldn’t round us up in such dangerous conditions and with so many mares pregnant.”

“They’ve done it before. When I was young—you weren’t born yet—a silver bird chased my band through deep snow for miles.”

“Were you in foal at the time?”
“I was seven months along. The strain killed my baby. I didn’t abort, but the colt I dropped that year…Well, he was unequipped for life.”

Talus imagined a creature that was only half mustang lying at Aster’s feet in an alpine meadow. It suffered as naturally as others breathed, then sagged into death without experiencing a single moment of happiness. She trembled.

“What should we do? It would be easier to hide from the silver birds farther up the mountain, where we can duck into the aspen groves or weave through the junipers, but I don’t dare take my band to the high places in this weather,” Spurge said, breaking the sad silence that had fallen at the mention of the doomed colt.

Aster said, “I don’t either. Lupine could survive winter in the alpine zone, but our other little ones wouldn’t last long. They’re like your friend Milfoil’s daughter: average foals only able to cope with average hazards.”

“Yes. I worry about Draba. Talus and Vetch’s son Bitterroot are much stronger. If she makes it to next season, she’ll be okay, though.”

“That’s a tall order with a roundup coming.”

S urge and Aster paused. Talus could smell dread rising from their coats and hovering over them like a pungent vapor. The grulla’s pulse quickened. Draba’s vulnerability, previously a nebulous threat, gained definition, legitimized by the mares’ words.

“I wish the roundup could be delayed,” Spurge said. “The frail youngsters and the unborn would stand a better chance if the humans waited for the snow to thin before driving us through it. We’d be so much less exhausted afterward.”
Aster tossed her charcoal forelock angrily. “You’d think that would occur to them. It would if they cared about our comfort at all. But wishes won’t save our families, Spurge. We have to come up with a solution soon if Larkspur intends to separate the bands.”

“I’m at a complete loss.”

“I am, too. Let’s keep racking our brains and talk later. That big brown mare—you said her name is Vetch?—seems suspicious. I’d rather not tell my bandmates about the roundup until it’s upon us. Otherwise they’ll start jumping at shadows.”

Spurge and Aster parted. Talus resumed her faux search for grass as her mother neared. The black examined her filly’s progress, a small trough already collapsing in on itself.

“You’re not getting very far, are you? Here, let me do it,” Spurge said. She scraped at the hole, grunting with effort until a patch of yellow-green vegetation appeared. Talus grazed to maintain the ruse, then nickered. Draba joined her eagerly. Bitterroot spotted his sisters from his vantage point at Penstemon’s side. He hurried over, pushed past Talus without acknowledging her, and fed with gusto. The grulla turned to follow Spurge, who had left to help Larkspur clear the spring so the horses could drink.

Vetch was waiting for her. “Well, did you learn anything interesting?” the mare asked.

Talus said briskly, “No. They were just gossiping about stallions.” She pressed on, one ear revolving to catch Vetch’s snow-muffled stamp of rage. The thought of mustangs as mature as Spurge and Aster pining for male attention was ridiculous, but the filly didn’t want to stick around to sell her lie. She had more important concerns.

As the miserable morning evolved into a miserable afternoon, Talus brooded. Spurge’s wistful voice sounded again and again in her mind: “I wish the roundup could be delayed a few weeks. The frail youngsters and the unborn would stand a better chance…” Images of Draba
broken down like Yarrow appropriated the grulla’s field of vision. Once she even saw Spurge
prodding the body of a foal monstered by a brutal chase as Aster no doubt had in her youth.
Suddenly Talus knew what she had to do: destroy the pen.

That evening darkness brightened the snow, blotted out the horses, and ushered in a fierce
wind. The grulla joined her usual party—Spurge, Milfoil, and Draba—to stay warm while she
waited for her bandmates to fall asleep. Gradually the heavy, shallow breathing of the mustangs
around her deepened to a steady intake and outrush of air. Talus pushed her ears forward,
listening. At last she detected the semiconscious stirrings of Larkspur and Bistort. Both stood
near the spring, about a hundred meters to the right. Their perennial alertness would be her
biggest obstacle.

Talus suppressed the urge to run until the wind worked itself into a noisy rage. Then she
bolted, white powder cascading over her like hoof-displaced water. She slowed when she
reached the spot where the sagebrush scrub dropped away, the flat land slanting downhill toward
the clay barrens. Besides the wind, only silence swelled behind her. Apparently she had timed
her dash perfectly; otherwise the stallions would have charged after her to drive her back to the
spring.

The filly kicked up her heels joyfully and set off. As she advanced, the snow offered less
resistance, but she still tired much more rapidly than she would have on thawed ground.
Exhaustion replaced pride at her clever escape. Fatigue also increased her anxiety. She expected
to feel the claws of a mountain lion punch through her wooly winter coat and gouge holes in her
lungs at any moment. Once the scrambled cries of a bat made her balk and tremble as if trying to
wriggle free of her own skin. She chided herself for her cowardice and pressed on with her head
bowed to keep the wind from stinging her eyes. The grulla didn’t look up for several minutes.
When she did, an astounding sight greeted her: a broad, vertical streak shimmered between earth and sky.

Talus stopped and stared in terror-laced fascination. The streak drew closer, bobbing as it came. A musky odor accompanied it. Seconds later, Rimrock appeared, his enormous blaze glowing in the center of his night-blackened face.

“Fireweed, Greasewood,” the chestnut bachelor called, “you’d better get over here. We have a visitor. A lost foal. I think she’s from Spurge’s and Larkspur’s band.”

Talus switched her tail and said, “I’m not lost. I’m going somewhere very important.” Instantly she regretted her cheekiness. Stallions, even those who had not yet bred mares, had been known to kill foals that didn’t carry their blood.

“You are, are you?” another voice asked. Greasewood’s muzzle hove into view, the snip bisecting his nostrils shining. He sniffed the grulla’s loins and quivered. Talus crabstepped to put more distance between them. “She’s not far from her first estrus. Maybe we should hold onto her,” the big bay added, exchanging significant glances with Rimrock.

Fireweed shouldered his comrades aside. The red dun’s size and strength awed Talus even in her fear. “You’re talking nonsense, Greasewood. We don’t steal immature fillies,” he snapped. “Now, why are you by yourself, little one?”

Talus pinned her ears. She didn’t want to cooperate with the bachelors. Instead of responding to Fireweed, she fired off a question of her own. “Why are you three all the way down here?”

“With your father and Bistort holed up near the spring over the past few days, we’ve had to go elsewhere to drink. There’s a small creek to the east.”

“Have you been to the clay barrens? Did you see anything strange there?”
“Why? What are you getting at?”

“Nothing. I’m just curious.”

Fireweed studied Talus. She couldn’t say whether he was amused or annoyed by her impertinence. Finally, he said, “I sense more than curiosity in your voice, little one.”

The grulla churned the snow with a front hoof in irritation. “Talus. My name is Talus. I’m Spurge’s daughter and there’s nothing little about me.”

“Well, Talus, daughter of Spurge, since you won’t tell us what you’re doing, we’ll take our leave. Rimrock, Greasewood, follow me.” The stallions skirted the filly and continued up the mountain. As they passed Talus, she felt tremendous power in their footfalls. Might Fireweed and his friends be of use to her? She certainly would be safer with such robust companions.

“Hold on,” she called. “I’m heading to the barrens to knock down a pen.”

Fireweed, Rimrock, and Greasewood whirled in tandem and gazed at her with the whites of their eyes shining in the gloom like crescent moons. For a minute only the keening of the wind registered. Talus’s stomach plummeted. She had hoped for an immediate reaction.

“A pen is being constructed on the barrens?” Fireweed asked at length.

“I think so. Aster told my mother she heard the pounding of human tools from that direction,” Talus said.

“But that means…a winter roundup.” The red dun began to pace, his head high and his nostrils flared as if he were ready to leap into flight at the slightest sign of danger. Horror also leaked from the sweat glands of Rimrock and Greasewood.

“Yes. Unless I can delay—”

Rimrock interrupted. “And how are you going to do that? Kick the pen to pieces? A tiny thing like you?”
Talus couldn’t think of a retort. She had not yet figured out how to dismantle the pen. She wasn’t even sure she could find it. “I have to try something,” she said defensively. “Not all of the foals in my band would make it through a roundup this early in the year.”

Rimrock and Greasewood looked at the grulla with a combination of pity and scorn. Fireweed, however, seemed to take her seriously. “I’ll help you. Let’s visit the clay barrens,” he said.

Greasewood cried, “You’re joking. You can’t go to a place where humans have been. It’s dangerous.”

“Besides, the filly could be mistaken. We shouldn’t act on her knowledge,” Rimrock chimed in.

“We?” Fireweed said. “You two don’t have to come. This li—Talus and I understand if you’re too scared.” Rimrock and Greasewood hastened to assure the red dun that they were not afraid. The matter was settled. Immediately the four mustangs broke into the swiftest trot they could manage in the dense snow, Talus in the lead and Fireweed at the rear.

Though she always ran near the front of her band thanks to Spurge’s high rank, the grulla had never before guided adult horses anywhere. The experience filled her with the same queasy joy that had seized her when she taunted Lupine: the thrill of power. Did her mother and Aster enter a similar state as they pranced along ahead of their comrades? Or had they been top mares for so long that the novelty had worn off?

For the next few minutes, Talus let her euphoria sweep her worries aside. She forgot Draba. She forgot the half-formed colt. She forgot pens and silver birds and human beings. Only the present counted. Only her young, fit body charged with purpose, the sting of ice on her
fetlocks, the smells of Mount Mesteño sharpened by the cold, the hoofbeats of her makeshift followers pursuing her like an auditory wake.

When the ground flattened, Talus knew she had made it to the clay barrens. She halted. Rimrock, Greasewood, and Fireweed did as well. Together the mustangs observed their surroundings. The wind had died, leaving the land hushed and white. Not a single print marred the snow, not even the elongated tracks of a rabbit’s hind feet. The impression that she was the first creature to venture into the area in years dizzied Talus. Yet as soon as she sniffed the air, the illusion vanished. A smell reminiscent of Willow Creek emanated from the darkness. Humans had, indeed, been to the mountain recently.

Greasewood retreated, tossing his forelock in a physical reaction of disgust. “Ugh! We should turn around. The stench is too strong,” he said.

Rimrock said, “I’m with you. There might be humans out here. Why else would the odor—”

“Control yourselves,” Fireweed said, though he had retracted his own nostrils to block out the stink. “The scent is powerful but stale. The humans are gone. I bet the last storm forced them to abandon their work.”

Talus remembered the snowfall that had obliterated her bandmates while she leaned against Draba for warmth and thought Fireweed was right. She pressed on, drawing the stallions with her. Presently the pen loomed ahead of her. It resembled the inner workings of an animal. Bones and guts plucked from the body of a gigantic creature, then forced to lead an independent existence. The enclosure could be entered through a pair of jaws made of a soft yet stiff material the color of dirt; a horse pursued by a silver bird wouldn’t know the difference until too late. Farther in, the jaws narrowed to a throat comprised of a hard substance that glittered in the
starlight. This passageway emptied into a large, square stomach with the same consistency. Both the throat and stomach had horizontal ribs—a sickening conflation of the digestive and skeletal systems. The grulla avoided the jaws, licked the outside of the throat, and backpedaled.

“Horrible!” she cried, an iron-rich, almost bloody taste on her tongue.

Fireweed said, “That’s metal. Humans build things out of it. I wish they would use wood instead. This stuff is denser. More difficult to knock down. I’m not sure we’re equal to the task.”

Talus returned to the jaws and stared through them into the gullet of the pen. Shutting her eyes to diminish her terror, the filly stepped forward. When she had gathered enough courage, she looked about and shivered. If the structure offended now, it would be as foul as a decay-ripened carcass during the roundup, when the reek of panicked mustangs mingled with that of their captors.

When Talus reached the stomach, she imagined a crush of horses milling in the relatively small space, their ears flattened, their eyes rolling to white, their muzzles taut with anxiety. A terrible desire to run gripped her. To run until she weaved with exhaustion and fell. To run because there was still room to ply her legs, more acreage than she could traverse in a lifetime of roaming Mount Mesteño. The grulla would have wheeled and fled if Fireweed hadn’t appeared beside her.

“Don’t be frightened,” he said. “There’s no danger for the moment. Let’s search for weak spots. Rimrock, Greasewood, get in here! You can’t leave everything for me and the filly.”

The blaze-faced chestnut and the snip-nosed bay joined them reluctantly, muttering about how unnatural it was for mustangs to set hoof in a pen of their own volition. Fireweed silenced the pair with an angry snort. Chagrined, Rimrock and Greasewood circled the stomach, trying to find flaws in the humans’ handiwork. Meanwhile Talus tapped one foot against a slat with the
red dun watching over her shoulder. The metal reverberated, producing a thin, bright sound not unlike the ring of Finch’s silver shoes. Despair chilled the foal’s gut. There was no way she could damage such tough material.

Talus glanced at Fireweed. “It’s too hard. I’d break my bones if I kicked that,” she said.

“Yes, but your bones aren’t fully developed yet. Mine are,” he replied in a tone the grulla deemed unnecessarily superior. Nevertheless, she withdrew to allow him to assess the situation.

The stallion whiffed and then mouthed the rib Talus had inspected. His ears flicked upright. He whinnied to the other bachelors. They hurried over.

“What is it?” Rimrock asked.

Fireweed said, “Use your nose.”

Rimrock and Greasewood inhaled and gazed at the red dun. After a second, the bay said, “Rust. So what?”

“Rust weakens metal,” Fireweed explained. “If the three of us strike in unison, we can break these ribs without hurting ourselves.”

Talus detected the olfactory version of the bloody flavor lingering on her tongue and, focusing her vision, noticed that most of the metal had a flaky substance clinging to it. “I don’t understand. Why would the humans build a bad pen?” the filly said.

Fireweed snorted and stamped. “They underestimate equine intelligence all the time. I suspect they assumed this metal would do just because a single horse can’t dent it. As if we’re not clever enough to combine forces. All right, Talus. Stand back.”

The grulla gave the bachelors a wide berth. Fireweed, Rimrock, and Greasewood lined up with their hindquarters a meter from the far end of the stomach. Talus hoped Fireweed wasn’t wrong, that the metal really would bend instead of fracturing limbs. She pawed the snow
nervously. In the distance, a pale band of light sat on the horizon. Morning was on its way. Somehow that added more urgency to the proceedings.

“Half strength ought to be enough,” Fireweed said to Rimrock and Greasewood. “Besides, we can’t risk injury. Also be careful not to stick a leg through the gaps. But if you do, don’t struggle. I saw a mare lame herself that way.”

The stallions stood still for one breathless second. Then they lashed out with their rear hooves in tandem. All three sets of feet connected with the central rib—it parted from the rest of the structure and landed in the snow, leaving a large hole. Talus dashed forward, ducked her head, and leaped through the opening. She jogged back to Fireweed with her ears up and her tail high.

“It worked!” the filly cried. “No human could keep me in here for long now!”

Fireweed said, “But you’re short. Barely taller than my withers. A full grown mustang wouldn’t be able to squeeze free like you. We’re going to have to drop the upper rib, too.”

“I’m not kicking even rust-covered metal at a steep angle. It’s not safe,” Rimrock said.

Greasewood reared, bent his knees, and pressed them against the highest rib until it creaked under his weight. He returned to earth with a soft thud. “I think we can just push,” he said.

The bachelors faced the stomach shoulder to shoulder. Talus joined them. Fireweed glanced at her but remained silent. The grulla couldn’t hurt herself by simply leaning on the metal. After gathering their strength for a moment, the four horses rose and applied themselves to the topmost rib. Talus channeled every bit of power in her developing body into the effort, her muscles straining against her skin, the veins that descended from her eyes to her nostrils standing as they filled with blood. She started to breathe heavily. Next to her, Fireweed grunted with
exertion. Low moaning from the other side of the red dun indicated that Rimrock and Greasewood were also tiring.

At the very instant the mustangs’ stamina petered out, the rib broke. It gave so suddenly that Talus whinnied in surprise when her forelegs hit the snow. Several seconds passed before she registered her triumph. Once she comprehended the enormity of the accomplishment—she, Fireweed, Rimrock, and Greasewood had successfully pitted the team spirit of horses against human intelligence—not even her smarting lungs could restrain her pride. The males, too, seemed awed. They gazed at the shattered metal without speaking. No one uttered a word until the sparrows’ plaintive dawn chorus floated down from the mountain.

Fireweed said, “Three more to go.”

Talus looked at him with a startled expression. For some reason, it had not occurred to her that they would have to destroy all four stomach walls to slow the humans’ progress a significant amount. The grulla wilted. But as soon as she imagined Draba collapsing in a snowdrift while the band galloped on, the mustangs too maddened by the drone of silver birds to realize they had left a loved one behind, Talus knew she couldn’t let fatigue stop her from acting. Plus, she refused to show weakness in front of Fireweed, Rimrock, and Greasewood. If they weren’t too exhausted to continue, she wasn’t either.

The work went on for another hour, the bachelors kicking loose the middle ribs, the filly pitching in to fell the top ones. Finally the job was done. When the humans returned, they would have to begin construction anew. Talus pricked her ears at the thought of the bizarre two-legged creatures emitting sounds of frustration as they inspected the pen. But this time her joy did not last long. Exhaustion rippled from her withers to her hindquarters and her shins ached from prolonged contact with the metal. Also, now that the sun had risen, the light casting blue
shadows on the snow, Spurge would wake at any minute to find her daughter missing. Talus didn’t want her mother to worry and then chastise her in front of the band. These concerns made it impossible to revel in her success.

Fireweed must have sensed the grulla’s anxiety. “Let’s head back to the sagebrush scrub. Your dam is probably beside herself and if Larkspur thinks we stole you…Well, I’d rather not fight him again,” he said.

The horses left the clay barrens at a sedate pace. Talus could tell she was slowing down the stallions; they had worn themselves out, too, but their powers of recovery greatly surpassed hers. Even so, they showed no signs of impatience. Whenever she paused to rest, the three waited for her to catch her breath in polite silence. She wondered if she had gained their respect and hoped that Fireweed in particular was impressed by her resolve. Maturity—separation from Spurge—would hurt less if she could count on being claimed by a male as handsome and resourceful as the red dun. Talus had no such guarantee, of course. Once a filly outgrew her natal band, she had to obtain membership in a new group right away or risk the dangers of isolation. The first stallion she encountered, regardless of his merits, would become her protector, his mates her family.

Talus reached the spring well into the morning. As soon as she crested the slope that graded into the scrubland, Draba spotted her. The little dunalino whinnied a greeting and called, “Talus is okay! Spurge, Talus is over here!”

The black mare appeared immediately, plunged through the snow toward the grulla, and pulled up in alarm when she noticed Fireweed, Rimrock, and Greasewood. She stared straight ahead but rotated her ears in the direction of the mustangs behind her. Talus recognized the expression. Spurge was assessing the situation, weighing her chances of wresting her foal from
the bachelors against the likelihood that they would take possession of her as well if she ventured too far from her band.

“Draba,” she said at length, “tell your mother to fetch Larkspur and Bistort. We may be in a predicament.”

Talus watched her sister vanish. She stepped forward to assure Spurge that Fireweed and his companions meant no harm only to halt with a hoof in the air. The stallions had agreed to escort her home, not to abstain from any mare-napping. And here was her beautiful dam, vulnerable on the fringes of the herd. The filly cocked her head, studying Fireweed. His eyes gleamed like creek-washed stones and his nostrils had widened to perfect ovals, exposing the sensitive pink flesh deep inside them. Talus shuddered. She feared for Spurge—and envied her ability to arouse the red dun.

Larkspur and Bistort arrived with their necks arched and their tails raised. Several other horses, including Milfoil, Draba, and Aster, followed at a safe distance. Talus and Draba exchanged terrified glances. The grulla longed to run to her bandmates, but if she did, Spurge would charge in to cover her, risking capture by the bachelors. Now it seemed strange to Talus that only minutes earlier she had considered Fireweed, Rimrock, and Greasewood her allies.

“Fireweed,” Larkspur said, advancing upon the interlopers while Bistort guarded the mares, “you and your friends have made a mistake. That filly isn’t old enough to breed. She won’t even go into heat for the first time until summer. Surrender her or I’ll fight you.”

The threat of battle rattled Fireweed even in his excited state. His eyes dimmed and his nostrils shrank. “We didn’t steal your daughter, Larkspur. She left her band in the night. We’re here to return her to you,” he said, lowering his head to show deference to the battle-scarred dun.
Larkspur asked, “Talus, is this true?” The stallion’s gentle gaze, so at odds with his hard body and abraded coat, shifted to the young one.

“Yes,” Talus said. “I went to the clay barrens after everyone fell asleep.”

“Why?”

Behind Larkspur, Spurge and Aster stiffened. Talus recalled the silver buckskin’s words: “I’d rather not tell my bandmates about the roundup until it’s upon us. Otherwise they’ll start jumping at shadows.”

“I don’t know. I just felt like it.”

The grulla heard Fireweed, Rimrock, and Greasewood fidget uncomfortably, yet they didn’t betray her. Perhaps they had also detected Spurge’s and Aster’s tension and guessed its source. Talus tried to gauge Larkspur’s reaction to her lie without success—her sire merely regarded her intently for a few seconds.

At last, he said, “I thought you had learned not to wander off from your visit to Willow Creek. Spurge, it’s not my place to discipline your foal, but I suggest you have a talk with her.”

“I fully intend to,” Spurge said, adopting a stern expression. Talus saw through her mother’s anger; the mare was too determined to evade suspicion to care about punishing a wayward filly. “Come here. You’re in big trouble.”

Talus walked to her dam, clacking her teeth in a convincing display of trepidation. Once she reached Spurge, Larkspur relaxed a little. However, he would not let his guard down completely while the bachelors lingered near his mates. Neither would Bistort. When Fireweed sensed that hostility still radiated from the dun and the smoky black, he turned to his companions, silently telling them to move out. The three jogged off through the snow, traveling southeast to the water source they had mentioned before. Once the red mustang paused and
looked back at Talus. He opened his mouth to say something, hesitated, and followed Rimrock and Greasewood out of sight.

The moment Fireweed, Rimrock, and Greasewood disappeared, Draba rushed to Talus. The fillies pressed their heads together, breathing in each other’s scents hungrily. As their forelocks mixed, the grulla’s black mane dazzled by her sister’s flaxen one, Talus’s heart prickled with a love second only to the affection she felt for Spurge. If she had been able to recall the first day of her life with any clarity, she would have realized that Milfoil’s prophecy was coming true. Long after they severed ties with their natal band, the half-siblings would remain close companions, their friendship a constant in the otherwise unpredictable world of Mount Mesteño.

Talus and Draba broke apart with sheepish expressions, embarrassed by their own need. “I thought Fireweed had stolen you. I thought we’d be separated forever,” the dunalino said, her eyes downcast.

“No, but if he had cut my mother from the herd, I would have been forced to go with her. Then who knows when we’d meet again,” Talus replied, sensing that they both wanted to justify their behavior to relieve their discomfort.

“Draba,” Milfoil said, “let’s give Spurge and Talus some privacy. They’re due for a talk about the importance of staying with the group.”

When the pair departed, most of the onlookers went with them, leaving Spurge, Talus, and Aster alone. The lead mares converged on the filly. She pinned her ears defiantly. Were they angry at her for listening in on their conversation? The grulla steeled herself. As usual, she was not about to admit to wrongdoing.
“Well, you little spy, what happened at the clay barrens? I assume you saw the pen. Have
the humans finished it yet?” Spurge asked.

Talus’s defensiveness melted under the flame of her dam’s urgency. She said, “Yes—
before the bachelors and I got to it.”

The black and the silver buckskin jerked their heads upright in surprise. Talus began to
enjoy herself. She waited for the adults to urge her to elaborate, milking the moment for drama.

Aster said, “What are you saying? Surely you didn’t destroy the pen. No horse has ever
figured out how to do that.”

Talus straightened, growing tall with pride. “Fireweed did. He noticed that the pen was
made of weak, rusty metal, so it was safe to kick. We knocked down the walls except for the
bottom ribs.”

“Is she telling the truth?” Aster said to Spurge.

The mustang regarded her daughter with flared nostrils. Talus stood quietly. The scents
still clinging to her coat—the bachelors’ earthy musk, the blood-like aura of the metal, and the
sour odor of humans—would speak for themselves.

After a moment, Spurge’s muzzle relaxed. She looked at Aster and said, “Talus isn’t
lying. She smells like everything in her story. Besides, she wouldn’t joke about such a serious
matter. She’s a rascal, but she means no harm.”

Aster’s attention transferred from Spurge to Talus. The grulla, humbled by the silver
mare’s placid yet authoritative gaze, pretended to be interested in a flock of crows passing
overhead. “Yes,” Aster said, a hint of amusement in her voice. “Your filly has a good soul
hidden beneath all that mischief. And, more importantly, she may have saved a few lives last
night.”
Aster stared at Talus for another moment, then rejoined her bandmates. Spurge turned to her foal. The sun, a white-gold ball at dawn, had lost definition but not intensity. Its rays outlined the black horse, illuminating every stray hair in her mane. Talus, still exhausted, wanted nothing more than a drink from the spring, a mouthful of grass, and a long nap. Yet something about her lightstruck dam arrested her. She stayed where she was, waiting for the older mustang to speak.

“I should be mad at you for running off again,” Spurge said, “but what you did was remarkable. Remarkable not because it took speed or strength or courage—those are common gifts for our species—but because it took selflessness. For the first time in your life, you placed more importance on the well-being of the band than your own safety. For the first time in your life, you acted like a lead mare. Maybe even a great mare. I’m so proud to have you for a daughter.”

Talus didn’t know what to say. Her mother hadn’t shown this much emotion since Finch’s reappearance. The grulla nuzzled Spurge since affection seemed the appropriate response. Deep down she was troubled. The euphoria that had surged through her as she guided Fireweed, Rimrock, and Greasewood to the clay barrens weighed on her mind. During that heady gallop through the snow, her pride at being young and full of promise had pushed her concern for Draba aside, had caused her to forget everything except the power she would possess once she matured into a leader. How, then, could she be selfless?

And was selflessness really superior to speed, strength, and courage? Surely Spurge was mistaken. No one had ever praised Talus for putting herself at a disadvantage to help another. In fact, she had established herself as the finest foal on the mountain by doing the opposite. She never allowed Bitterroot or Draba to beat her in a race, much less feed and water before her if resources were limited. Nor, as both of her half-siblings had pointed out so recently, had she
considered the consequences of picking a fight with Lupine. Only her honor as a filly by Larkspur and out of Spurge had mattered at the time. Yet Aster had called her the most athletic little one to appear on Mount Mesteño for years in the wake of her victory over the blue roan, whereas now she merely had a “good soul.”

Spurge wandered back to the spring. Talus followed. Larkspur had kicked a hole in the ice. The grulla sucked up water until her stomach swelled and ached. When her thirst ebbed, she grazed on one of the few patches of exposed vegetation, milling her tail happily. After the stress of felling the pen, the brief standoff between the males, and her confusion over the value of selflessness, it was bliss to surrender to an impulse as basic as the desire to fill one’s belly.

Satiated, the mustang dug herself a bed in the snow and reclined with her legs tucked under her barrel. All around horses browsed on tufts of grass painstakingly uncovered or gathered together to pool body heat. As Talus watched them, sadness passed over her like the shadow of a cloud. She didn’t understand her sudden mood swing. Hunger and thirst had been appeased and rest was near. What could be amiss?

The filly picked her bandmates from the herd, focusing on them each in turn. Spurge nibbled Milfoil’s shoulder, reinforcing their already tight bond with social grooming. Draba, playing with Bistort’s offspring not out of exuberance but to keep warm, tumbled into a drift. Vetch and Bitterroot drank side by side, their eyes averted, their muscles stiff with tension. Currant dozed with her head on Penstemon’s withers. Larkspur patrolled the area with Bistort, occasionally pinning his ears at the smoky black—their truce was waning. At last Talus identified the source of her melancholy. The normalcy of the morning distressed her because it would soon be shattered by the drone of silver birds. The grulla had stalled the humans, not stopped them from rounding up the mustangs of Mount Mesteño. In a month or less, she might
recall the days she spent in the sagebrush scrub with nostalgia. The horses were cold, tired, and stressed, but they were together. They were still together.
A week later, after Larkspur had driven off Bistort and his mares, humans returned to the mountain. The sound of their tools reached Spurge’s band as a faint knocking. It made all nine mustangs prop in alarm. For several minutes, only their skin moved, quivering as horror rolled through their bodies. Then Currant panicked. She wheeled and bolted for the upper elevations, carrying Draba with her. Milfoil herded her daughter back to the group within seconds, but Larkspur had trouble catching the wild-eyed strawberry roan. By the time he retrieved her, both were blowing hard.

Penstemon scolded Currant as soon as she rejoined the other mares. “What were you thinking?” the old chestnut asked. “There isn’t a human in sight. You know not to run unless you can see a threat. Otherwise everyone will spook and stampede.”

Currant clacked her teeth apologetically. Talus looked away, ashamed by her bandmate’s cowardice even though her own mouth tasted like fear. In a more generous mood, the grulla might have admitted that only her advance knowledge of the human presence on Mount Mesteño had prevented her from leaping into flight herself.

Spurge said, “Penstemon is right. We must stay calm no matter what. A pen is being built—you can hear that plainly—but the actual roundup shouldn’t be conducted for a while yet.” The horses instantly converged on their beautiful black leader, turning to her for answers. Talus’s heartbeat quickened. She hoped that in the future she would inspire the same respect.

“What should we do in the mean time?” Milfoil asked. “We can’t just stay here. In open country, we’re easy to spot and trap. It would better to hide in the aspen groves or even the juniper belt.”
“The snow is still too thick. We would be hard pressed to find food higher up the mountain,” Penstemon said.

Vetch snorted in disgust and said, “I could survive in the aspen groves. So could Spurge, Larkspur, Talus, and Bitterroot. That’s a majority. We should do what’s best for the band as a whole.”

Spurge rounded on her chocolate-brown rival. “I will not jeopardize any member of this family, weak or strong. Neither will Larkspur.”

The mustangs stared at the scarred dun, waiting for him to weigh in. He hesitated. Vetch’s point had raised a complex question. Was it more team-oriented (and therefore horse-like) to accommodate every bandmate or to sacrifice the few for the many? Talus watched her father closely. Both Penstemon and Currant had been abandoned by their previous stallions after grief made them liabilities. Would Larkspur adopt a similar attitude toward the individuals Vetch had implied were not up to snuff? And if he did, would Spurge be forced to acquiesce? The grulla pinned her ears. If Draba could not cut it in the aspen groves, if she had to remain in the sagebrush scrub with her mother, Talus would refuse to leave her.

Finally Larkspur said, “Let’s not do anything yet. It should take the humans another week to prepare for the roundup. With the weather improving, much of the snow will have melted by then. We’ll have a clear path to the groves, access to enough grass for everyone, and at least a day or two to find the best cover before the silver birds arrive.”

Spurge and Talus relaxed. Vetch stomped off, the smell of her anger, a salty, sweaty odor, lingering in the air. Bitterroot gazed after his dam but did not follow. Apparently mare and foal had not forgiven each other. Talus’s insides squirmed with guilt. For a moment she
considered approaching the stocky colt. He noticed her studying him, switched his tail irritably, and turned his back on her.

And so the mustangs waited. Nothing changed. Every morning they pawed aside snow in their search for food, kicked through the ice that re-glazed the spring each night to drink gut-chilling water, and played intermittent games of chase to keep their muscles from stiffening with cold. Every afternoon they huddled in twos or threes with their heads on one another’s withers, their eyes shut against the stinging wind. Every evening they listened to the sounds of the mountain, the rumbling complaints of an earth struggling free of its winter bonds. Yet terror was their constant companion. At its most intense, it seemed a physical threat. Occasionally the horses glanced over their shoulders, expecting to find a dark shape bearing down on them, gaining definition as it neared.

Even the increasingly rare moments in which fright ebbed to trepidation were torture. A single question haunted the band: Which of us will make it through the roundup? Talus studied her fellow mustangs first with love and then with paranoia. Milfoil had said it was impossible to predict who would be culled and who would be released. Yet the grulla wondered whether the humans preferred to retain the strong, the animals capable of carrying them for miles at a fast pace. If so, she could be in greater danger than timid Draba, elderly Penstemon, and flighty Currant. The race from the silver bird would tax them more, but once in the pen, they would not stand out as riding prospects like the tougher members of the group. Talus didn’t think it was fair that her superiority increased her chances of losing her wildness. Resentment mingled with her affection for her vulnerable bandmates. She vowed to remain on Mount Mesteño at all costs.

At last the snow began to melt. One day it took on a pre-thaw glossiness, the next it thinned to a scab of frost, the next it seeped into the ground, lingering only as moisture on dead
grass. Spurge immediately made for the higher climes. The rest shadowed her. In the distance, they could see Bistort’s mares on the move, Aster in the lead with her charcoal mane streaming.

Horses were not the only residents of the mountain returning to their spring and summer haunts. Pronghorns, deer, and the odd elk appeared at intervals, their bodies lean, their ribs prominent. Coyotes squabbled over the rigid carcass of a doe preserved in ice for a month and now exposed. As the mustangs cantered past the macabre scene, Talus shuddered. The predators had opened the corpse’s belly and tugged out its gray entrails. She tried to ignore the fact that a similar fate awaited anyone who broke down during the roundup, but awful images crept into her mind nonetheless.

Spurge did not stop until she wove through the aspens into the riparian meadow where the foals had romped when they were a few months old. Here the bandmates would be able to graze on the withered yet filling bunchgrass within reach of the trees. When the silver birds descended on the mountain, their strange wings abler, humans crouched in their ribcages, the black mare would fly into the nearest grove with her loved ones behind her.
On the morning of the roundup, it was so quiet Talus could hear the ice on the creek sighing as it melted. She walked out into the meadow, her ears rotating to take stock of her surroundings. Not a single sparrow released its buzzy song into the cold air. Not a single deer scratched itself with a canine thrust of a rear leg, groaning with pleasure. Not a single bighorn sheep bleated in the alpine zone. The grulla froze, bewildered. A moment later, a bizarre sound reached her. At first it was a distant roar. But when its source drew near, it transformed into a loud chopping noise. Talus stared at the sky. Something bright appeared, its sides whitened and liquefied by sunlight. The young mustang strained to make sense of the foreign object. Suddenly Spurge was next to her.

“Get to the aspens. Now,” the black mare said, sending Talus racing for the trees.

“Everyone, take cover immediately. A silver bird is coming this way.”

The horses streaked into the grove at the southern limits of the meadow, Larkspur urging the slower mares with nips to the rump. Just as the final band member—old Penstemon—arrived, the bird soared up the mountain and hovered directly above the mustangs. They stayed motionless, hoping their earth tone coats would camouflage them even without extra help from the leaves that offered them such welcome shade in the summer. Talus forced herself not to look up through the bare branches at the awful creature’s underbelly and its straight, toeless talons. She could not afford to panic. Others already had the glassy-eyed aspects of animals going into shock.

“Were we quick enough? Did it see us?” Milfoil asked Spurge.
“I don’t know. But whatever you do, remain calm. If it hasn’t spotted us, we don’t want to alert it to our presence. If it has, it can’t get to us as long as we hold our position,” the leader answered.

Talus glanced at her mother. The mare seemed in charge of the situation, but her measured yet shallow breathing revealed that even she was afraid. Larkspur, too, lacked his usual confidence. The grulla dared not turn to observe him, but she flicked an ear in his direction and detected the nervous shuffle of his hooves. Talus’s fear increased with the realization that the two most capable horses in the band felt as vulnerable as the rest of them. Sweat curdled her hide. Draba trembled at her shoulder, also rank with dread.

Bitterroot, standing near an aspen across from his sisters, locked gazes with Talus. For a few seconds, they maintained eye contact, steadying one another. The tension between them dissolved. If the bird hadn’t been there, if stillness hadn’t been of the essence, the filly would have touched noses with the colt as she had on the day Spurge introduced her to her bandmates. Forelock to forelock, she would have apologized for embarrassing him in front of Vetch. She would have told him that, while his dam had high standards, everyone else knew he was all mustang. She would have admitted she loved him. Perhaps he would have responded in kind. But the roundup could not be put on hold on account of a foal’s guilt. Talus remained beside Draba, Bitterroot by the tree, forgiveness only half-achieved.

“Listen,” Currant said, her voice shaking as she fought the impulse to flee, “there’s a second bird on the mountain. Who’s it after? Bistort and his mares? Or Fireweed, Rimrock, and Greasewood?”

Talus pricked her ears. The tattoo of hooves, followed by the dirge of silver wings, approached from the west. The three bachelors couldn’t beat that much sound out of the earth. It
had to be Bistort’s band. Though the grulla wasn’t close with her older brother, she hated the thought of him on the run, his copper-tinged coat darkening with sweat as he struggled to herd his frightened family members together so no one got left behind.

“Don’t break from the grove no matter how tempted you are to join the stampede,” Spurge said.

Her warning proved timely. Within a minute, Aster galloped into the meadow with her companions on her heels. She tried to veer into the safety of the trees, but the bird that had honed in on her group flew lower to keep the mustangs in the open. From her vantage point, Talus could see terror on the silver buckskin’s face. The grulla also spotted Lupine matching strides with his mother Thistle. Lather had already gathered on his neck and between his rear legs. Still, he was in better shape than his bay sister. She trailed by several meters in spite of encouragement from her dam and Bistort. When the smoky black went by Talus, biting his little daughter’s hindquarters, his muscles slackened for an instant. The grulla interpreted the brief release: Bistort had yielded to despair only for his remarkable bloodlines to drive him forward once more. She hoped Spurge’s resolve and Finch’s courage would never quit on him.

Aster, Bistort, and their bandmates vanished. Talus smelled worry, a muted yet full-bodied variation on the scent of anxiety, emanating from her mother. The filly pressed her gray shoulder against the mare’s black one to acknowledge their shared sympathy for the stallion with the fiery ears. Under the circumstances, the gesture was all she could do to comfort Spurge. But it seemed to help. The odor faded and disappeared.

“Bistort’s loss may be our gain,” Spurge said with renewed strength. “If the humans capture his band, they may be less determined to have ours. Stay as still as you can and we stand a chance.”
Vetch snorted from behind Bitterroot. She said scornfully, “They don’t want just any mustang. There’s always a pattern. Sometimes they cull by sex, sometimes by age, sometimes by health...even color factors in to their selections. Remember Buttercup? I’m sure the humans retained her for her beautiful off-white coat.”

Larkspur snapped, “Be quiet, Vetch. You’ll scare the foals. Talus, Draba, Bitterroot, don’t listen—”

“My point is not all of Bistort’s mares will fit this year’s pattern. Those who don’t will be released. The humans will need to pick and choose from every band on Mount Mesteño to fulfill their quota. They’re not going to leave us alone because they’ve got a single stud and his mares in a tight spot,” Vetch said, speaking over the dun stallion.

Milfoil pinned her ears. “That doesn’t change our strategy. That doesn’t change the fact that we’re safest right here, hidden by the aspens. So stop saying such horrible things in front of my filly,” she said, studying Draba, whose eyes had widened but did not seem to be registering anything, with concern.

Vetch said, “Your daughter is nearly one, Milfoil. Start treating her like an adult,” but fell silent, perhaps because Bitterroot, too, had reacted badly to the topic. Though more serene than Draba, he quivered with fear. Of the youngsters, only Talus had control of her faculties. Yet this was a disadvantage. The grulla’s thoughts raced, bobbled, and plunged into irrationality.

She fixated on Milfoil’s use of the word “hidden.” Could the monster treading air above the grove really not make them out through the leafless trees? Wouldn’t they be better off in the juniper belt, where there was foliage to obscure them? Surely, if Spurge led them downhill at a rapid pace, they would reach the belt far enough ahead of the humans to secret themselves in the thick, intensely green vegetation. Talus flared her nostrils. A breeze from the south carried the
spicy perfume of the junipers to the upper elevations. The mustang’s heart split with longing. Less than two thousand feet of relatively stable terrain lay between her and refuge. Between her and the preservation of wildness.

“Mother,” she said, “the bird can see us. I know it can. We should run. We should run to the junipers. They would protect us. Cover us up.”

Spurge said, “That’s nonsense, Talus. We’d be set upon as soon as we left the aspens.” The black mare spoke in a dismissive tone, but Talus noticed her mother’s muscles tense, relaying a private message. Stay calm for the sake of our bandmates. They aren’t as strong as you and I.

Under normal circumstances, the grulla would have been flattered by her dam’s faith in her ability to endure the stress of a roundup and regained her cool immediately. But in her overwrought state, Talus didn’t understand why Spurge wouldn’t guide the horses to the juniper belt. The filly stamped and bobbed her head in exasperation. Her nervousness infected Draba and Bitterroot. Soon all three foals milled about, tossing their forelocks and tails. Once Draba, her blonde coat conspicuous, reared onto her hind legs directly under a break in the trees. The bird descended a few meters, ratcheting up the pressure. Its talons struck and splintered several branches. A particularly brittle bough cracked and dropped to the ground in front of Currant. She squealed, then described a circle in the snow-rotted leaf litter.

Larkspur traced the hysteria to its origins. “Spurge, get Talus to quiet down. Her tantrum is setting the others on edge. Draba and Bitterroot are likely to bolt,” he said.

“Yes,” Vetch echoed the stallion as she tried to pacify Bitterroot. “If you won’t put that troublemaker in her place, I will.”
Milfoil paused in the middle of nuzzling Draba. “You’re one to talk, Vetch. You started this mess with your ‘they don’t want just any mustang’ spiel,” she spat.

Spurge prodded Talus with her muzzle and said, “Settle. Our freedom depends on it.”

“No, it depends on reaching the belt. We have to go to the belt,” the grulla insisted. She butted her mother in an effort to force her out of the grove.

“Stop that! This isn’t like you, Talus.”

“Well, it isn’t like you to risk our happiness and maybe even our lives!”

“I’m not risking anything. We wouldn’t make it to the junipers. No mustang can outrun a silver bird.”

“I can. I’m no ordinary mustang.”

“You can’t. Trust me.”

Talus gazed into Spurge’s dark, frank eyes. Pity welled in the filly’s chest. Her dam was no longer the unassailable, towering, almost mythical figure that had dominated her youth. Spurge could be submissive. Frightened. Mistaken. And in her fallibility, she did not recognize her own daughter’s gifts, her own daughter’s capacity to overcome challenges that would stymie an average horse. Talus had faced the dangers of Willow Creek, outfooted Lupine, won praise from Aster, and destroyed a pen with the bachelors’ help. She could handle a stiff gallop to the juniper belt. Could lead her bandmates to shelter if they would only follow her.

The grulla looked from Spurge to Draba and Bitterroot. Both shook with the adrenaline of animals that would leap into flight at the slightest provocation. If Talus charged forward, they would, too, forcing their dams and therefore the entire group to dash after them. Another branch broke. The bird had dropped a foot or two. Its air-dicing wingbeats entered Talus’s ears and
lodged themselves in her brain, stirring her remaining patience into rage. She would not linger for even one more minute.

When Spurge turned to her fellow mares to remind them not to yield to the humans’ scare tactics, Talus seized the opportunity to sprint from the aspen grove. Their common sense effaced by terror, her siblings also streaked into the meadow. Instantly Spurge, Vetch, and Milfoil gave chase. Currant, teetering on the verge of panic, joined them. Larkspur and Penstemon had no choice but to rush out as well.

Talus sensed the whole band behind her. She set a course for the junipers and increased her pace. For a dizzying moment, it seemed she had distanced the bird. The wind tangled her mane, sailed along her flanks, and whistled in her tail. Her hooves barely touched the grass before they sprang upward again. She was sure no mustang had ever reached such a speed, that by the time the sun sank that night, the animals of Mount Mesteño would know her as the savior of her family, as the storm-colored filly who had evaded their common enemy, proving once and for all that wild things were the best and the bravest in the world.

But a second later, Spurge drew even. The black mare lowered her head, peeled her lips, and bit Talus, opening a shallow but wide hole on her shoulder. Squealing in pain, the grulla veered away from her mother, toward the trees. As she changed direction, the others followed, thundering back to their original hiding place. It was too late. The silver bird dived at the horses with its talons angled. They turned to avoid a blow and streamed downhill. Below them, in the clay barrens, the pen glistened, already teeming with white-eyed mustangs.
CHAPTER 11

The bird drove the horses through the juniper belt at a swift pace. At the front of the band with Talus, Spurge slowed, trying to buy time for her companions to duck into the vegetation, where they would be more difficult to herd down the mountain. But the gleaming monster had her measure. Whenever she eased to a canter, it swooped closer, threatening to strike the mustangs bringing up the rear if the lead mare didn’t pick up the tempo. The black ran on, her breath jangling in her throat.

Talus dripped blood. Adrenaline had numbed her wound, but its iron-heavy musk clung to her hide. The smell nauseated her. Yet it was the least of her worries. The drone of the bird’s wings, louder than ever before, caused her physical discomfort. She shook her head as if an insect had flown into her ear and lost its way. Grunts from behind told her she was not the only one maddened by the din. Even Vetch released a deep, instantly recognizable bellow.

“Stay calm,” Spurge cried to the group at large. “The bird will back off a little when we reach the sagebrush scrub.”

Milfoil called, “Spurge, Draba is weakening. She’s going to collapse at this rate!”

Talus broke stride. She couldn’t let her sister suffer the same fate as Yarrow. Bitterroot, unable to check quickly enough, slammed into the grulla’s hindquarters. She pitched forward onto her knees. A second later, she was on her feet again, heaved upright by a smack from Vetch’s skull.

“Don’t stall unless your mother says so,” the brown mare scolded her.
The filly barely registered her bandmate’s anger—there was no time for hurt feelings. Instead, she accelerated, drawing even with Spurge, who had yet to respond to Milfoil’s desperate cry. Had the black mustang not heard her friend?

“Mother,” Talus shouted, “Draba’s in trouble!”

Spurge snapped, “I know. I’m trying to come up with a solution.”

“Well, hurry!”

“Stop distracting me, Talus.”

The horses continued their madcap descent through the junipers, leaping shrubs and flushing grouse. Once a pronghorn, startled by the band’s approach, flashed across the grulla’s path. A hacking noise reached Talus over the roar of the bird’s wings. Draba’s wind had failed.

“Milfoil, fall back and veer to the side. Larkspur, shadow her. The humans won’t pressure you if they think you’re just herding a wayward mare into line,” Spurge said.

A moment later, Talus detected a shuffling sound. Milfoil must have led Draba away from the others, allowing the little dunalino to slow down while Larkspur put on a show of struggling to keep his family members together. Gradually the hardy, wind-warped junipers gave way to pale green sagebrush. When the land leveled out, Talus recognized the scrublands she had left so recently. In the distance, sunlight glanced off the spring. Beyond it lay the clay barrens.

Larkspur called from the rear, “The bird is rising. The bird is rising!”

Spurge cantered, then trotted. Her bandmates followed suit. All nine mustangs gasped for air, their barrels rounding as they inhaled and contracting as they exhaled. Talus had never felt so exhausted. The grueling run had scorched her lungs and puttiıldı her leg muscles. She jogged along at her dam’s hip as loose-limbed as a newborn foal.

“Why are the humans letting up? Aren’t they afraid we’ll escape?” the grulla asked.
“We’re in open country with nowhere to hide. They can afford to give us a rest,” Spurge answered.

“What do we do now?”

“Nothing. Recover. We’ll make one last bid to shake the bird when everyone’s in better shape.”

Talus looked over her shoulder. Vetch and Bitterroot, though dark with sweat, appeared to be in relatively good condition. Currant, too, seemed okay under the circumstances. But Penstemon trembled as if she had a fever. Every few steps, her old knees threatened to buckle. Only Draba was worse off. The filly wheezed audibly. Larkspur and Milfoil flanked their daughter, occasionally making eye contact. Talus faced forward. For some reason, she couldn’t bear to see the battle-scarred dun in pain. Milfoil’s despair was expected. Larkspur’s punched a hole in the gut.

The grulla whispered to her mother, “Will Draba be all right? And what about Penstemon?”

“I don’t know,” Spurge said sadly. “We’re going to have to gallop again when we hit the spring.”

“Maybe I can distract the bird if I—”

“Don’t you dare pull any more stunts! You’ve caused enough trouble for one day.”

Talus pinned her ears yet held her tongue. The spring loomed. Only a few shards of ice remained on its surface. A cold, sweet smell emanated from the water and mingled with the sharp perfume of the sagebrush. The filly flared her nostrils to take in both odors. She hoped they would stay with her forever, would somehow keep her wild even if the humans captured her. Spirited her away from everything she loved, from everything that made her an animal. The soft
alpine grass. The yowling of coyotes at dusk. The wind crying, “Catch me. Catch me. Can you catch me?” The black hour before daybreak, when she couldn’t see her bandmates but she knew they were there…

“Spurge, the bird is preparing to dive,” Larkspur said.

“Everyone, listen closely,” the black mare said. “In a moment, the humans will drive us out of the scrubland into the barrens. They want to hustle us into their trap as quickly as possible. Let them. Stick to the course they set for us until we near the pen. A mountain mahogany stand will appear on our left. The trees are dense and tangled. Good protection. Head for them on my signal.”

Talus’s heart beat faster. There was still hope. Still a chance to escape. Her legs regained their vigor. Some of it, anyway. While she had control of her movements once again, her body felt rigid, heavy, a little slow to respond to her commands.

The bird dropped toward the horses, its talons glinting menacingly. Spurge streaked forward. Talus chased after her mother. She flicked an ear backward to check on the others. One set of hooves struck the earth at irregular intervals. Penstemon must have started to limp.

However, on the whole, the brief respite seemed to have helped the band. Draba’s breathing sounded less labored.

Pounding along at Spurge’s side, Talus recognized the spot where she had balked at the sight of Rimrock’s blaze. The barrens were not far off. She lifted her gaze to the horizon. A small cloud of dust mushroomed into the air. Perhaps Bistort and his family, already in the pen, were churning the dirt as they milled about with increasing hysteria. The grulla’s throat constricted with fear. It astonished her that she could experience anything more complex than fatigue while flying for her life.
“Spurge, where is the stand? I don’t see the stand,” Vetch said from behind. “Have you led us astray?”

The black mare ignored her bandmate. Her eyes swept the land desperately. Talus also searched, but the barrens were alien to her without their blanket of snow. She might as well have charged into a completely foreign environment.

A second later, the pen hove into view. It was larger than the one Talus had destroyed. Within it, terrified mustangs bucked, whirled, and reared. They stank of despair, confusion, rage. Of willful creatures suddenly rendered powerless. Of loss.

“Now!” Spurge said. She swerved to the left. Talus shadowed her. As the grulla turned, she spotted the mountain mahogany stand. It seemed far away. It was all they had. Talus quickened, her muscles bulging with effort. She heard the rest of the band break into a more torrid gallop than before. Would Penstemon’s legs and Draba’s lungs withstand this final, furious rush? Or would the two stagger, then sink to the ground, their exhaustion a kind of gravity? Talus cleared her head. There was no time to worry about individual horses, not even herself. There was only time to run.

The stand—comprised of short, twisted trees—neared. Talus could smell the foliage. Apparently Spurge could, too. The black mare flattened her ears until they vanished into her mane, slowed down for several energy-gathering strides, and accelerated dramatically. Her bandmates copied her. As the mustangs reached top speed, the sound of the bird’s wings grew fainter. Talus’s heart opened with joy. They had distanced the silver monster. They had won the race for their freedom. In a few feet, the chase would be over, a memory of terror.
At that moment, something extraordinary happened. A bay stallion exploded from the mahogany. He crossed Spurge’s path in a flat-out sprint. Talus would have changed direction and followed him if she hadn’t seen her dam’s tail jerk up in alarm.

“Keep going straight! He’s working for the humans!” Spurge cried.

Vetch echoed the leader: “Stay on course! It’s a trick!”

The other mares, led by the impressionable Currant, charged after the bay. No stallion would watch his family torn apart with equanimity. Larkspur drew even with Spurge and nipped her in a last-minute bid to herd his mates together once more. She had to obey the stronger horse. And so the black mustang, with Talus, Vetch, and Bitterroot in her wake, tried to catch the deserters. Her body taut with exertion, she passed Draba, Milfoil, and Penstemon. But before she could overtake Currant and redirect the group to the mahogany trees, the strawberry roan sailed into the jaws of the pen. Unable to brake in time, Spurge also entered the trap, drawing the rest of the horses with her. They proceeded from the throat to the stomach of the enclosure, where several more bands milled in confusion.
CHAPTER 12

The pen was chaos. Bistort’s band, Fireweed’s gang of bachelors, and a small family led by a gray stallion mingled. Some horses stood in one place, their eyes glassy with shock. Others kicked their neighbors in claustrophobia-induced rage. Periodically stallions picked fights more out of a desire for order, for conflicts with clear winners and losers, than anger. A few yearlings, separated from their mothers, huddled together like lost newborns. Talus suddenly felt very small herself. She stepped closer to Spurge.

“Mother,” she said, “what do we do now?”

The grulla glanced to her left when she received no response. A colt from the gray’s posse paws the earth at her side. Where was Spurge? Talus skittered away from the stranger only to bump into a bay roan mare nearly as burly as Vetch. She jumped back in time to avoid a nasty bite. Panic turned her insides to liquid. The filly was surrounded by more mustangs than she had ever seen in one place, but she had never felt so alone.

“Mother, Milfoil, Draba, Bitterroot!” she cried, calling for her bandmates over and over again, until their names became extensions of her body, as essential as her heart.

No one answered. Talus’s hysteria increased. Adrenaline sharpened her vision. The sky became a terrible blue weight, the sides of the pen gleamed with a blinding, star-like radiance, and the horses, sun-burnished but vicious in their fear, grew both astonishingly beautiful and intensely ugly at the same moment. Talus staggered, dizzied by an excess of sensation.

Just when the grulla thought she couldn’t stay on her feet any longer, a familiar smell steadied her. Bitterroot had appeared in the melee. The colt was bleeding from the withers. He must have ventured too close to a highstrung adult.
“Bitterroot! Bitterroot, come here,” Talus yelled.

The dun spied his sister through the mass of scared mustangs. He ran to her, narrowly dodging the hindquarters of the same bay roan mare. The foals stared at each other for a few seconds. Talus saw despair as great as her own on Bitterroot’s face. She tried to speak, but choked on their shared helplessness. He seemed to understand. The only thing worse than pain was recognition of pain in someone else.

“Where is my mother?” Bitterroot asked after a pause.

“I don’t know,” Talus said. “I can’t find mine, either.”

“What should we do?”

“Our family must be on the other side of the pen. Let’s head over there.”

Talus and Bitterroot looked for an opening in the crowd. One formed a horse length away. They lunged for it. A moment later, the gray stallion, attempting to herd his scattered mares into a knot, filled the gap. The young mustangs collided with him. He rounded on them, pinned his ears, and prepared to strike.

Talus flinched in anticipation of a blow. So did Bitterroot. An instant later, Penstemon arrived. She put herself between the aggressive male and her bandmates to absorb the force of the attack. Hooves pummeled the old chestnut’s flanks. She shuddered yet remained standing. Talus couldn’t believe the frail horse had endured such punishment. Penstemon was tougher than she looked.

The second the gray whirled off, as disoriented by the altercation as his victims, Talus and Bitterroot dashed to the elderly mare. She turned to greet them, her ears pricked, her eyes gentle. In the future, the grulla would try in vain to remember whether she had sensed all was not
well, whether Penstemon had gasped or bobbed or done anything that might have prepared the foals for what happened next.

“We’ve been trying to reach you two,” the chestnut said. “Your mothers—”

Penstemon’s right front cannon bone fractured an inch below the knee. She dropped to the dirt without uttering a sound and lay on her side, her lower leg bent at a steep angle. Only a mottled strip of flesh prevented it from parting with the rest of the limb altogether. Talus trembled. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t even think. Past and future tumbled away. It seemed she had been born into and would die within that moment of horror. But when Penstemon spoke, Talus reacted.

“What’s wrong with me? Why did I go down?” the mare asked, raising her head feebly.

The grulla hastened to her injured family member. “Don’t talk. You have to save your strength.”

Bitterroot added, “Yes, stay as still as you can.”

“No,” Penstemon said, “no, I think, if you help me, I can get up.”

Talus gazed at Bitterroot in distress. Neither could figure out what to do. Penstemon wasn’t capable of supporting her weight. Aiding her would simply prolong her agony. At a loss, they watched the old mustang struggle. All around horses attempted to clear paths to their bandmates. When the gray’s colt squeezed past Talus, she recalled Yarrow, pictured him prone in the juniper clearing.

The filly whispered to Penstemon, “You told me you hoped Yarrow didn’t fight to regain his feet after he collapsed. Didn’t cause himself unnecessary suffering.”

The chestnut rolled a dark eye toward Talus. She seemed to be concentrating, sorting through the countless memories she had accumulated over the years in an effort to return to the
day her son broke down. What did she see as she reviewed the odds and ends of almost two decades of living? Mount Mesteño at sunset, its crags filled with pink light? Her dam, long dead but still vivid, still smelling of sagebrush and grass? Herself as a foal, wobble-legged yet happy, unaware of her own vulnerability? Finally she appeared to find the recollection she sought.

“I did hope that. I did. Poor Yarrow. Will I run with him again? Or is this all we have?” Penstemon said.

A new grief seized Talus. She had always assumed that grown horses accepted death, that at a certain age they acquired enough wisdom to take leave of the world on good terms. Penstemon’s question turned the grulla’s belief system on its head. At least the old mare had stopped thrashing, though.

“Of course you will,” Talus said. “He’s been waiting for you.”

“He’ll recognize me, won’t he? I’ve aged…”

“Yes. Nobody could ever forget you.”

“Talus, listen carefully. I need you to tell Currant something for me. I need you to tell her—”

Before the filly could hear the message, a human climbed into the pen. Its stench sent mustang after mustang hurtling to one side of the enclosure. Caught in the exodus, Talus and Bitterroot left Penstemon. As they galloped off, a noise as loud as thunder and as staccato as the bark of a fox split the air. For a moment the thunder-bark obliterated all other sounds. Talus didn’t know what had made such a racket, but she sensed Penstemon was no more.

“Larkspur!” Bitterroot cried. “Larkspur, over here!”
Talus glanced at her brother and followed his gaze to the battle-scarred dun. Larkspur was scuffling with Greasewood. As soon as he heard Bitterroot, he dealt the bachelor a ferocious blow and ran to his offspring.

“Talus, Bitterroot, come with me,” he said.

“Penstemon snapped her leg. She was fine one minute...the next, she was on the ground,” Bitterroot said.

Talus switched her tail. “It was that gray stallion. He must have struck the leg she was already favoring!”

Sorrow deepened Larkspur’s gaze. He said at length, “I thought I saw her go down. But we don’t have time to grieve. Let’s return to your dams.”

The foals shadowed their sire as he bullied his way across the pen. Spurge, Vetch, Milfoil, Draba, and Currant had formed a circle to protect themselves from overwrought mustangs. Talus hurried to Spurge, Bitterroot to Vetch. The grulla breathed in her mother’s scent hungrily—the sour odor of anxiety had never been sweeter.

“I’m so glad you’re okay. Where is Penstemon? She spotted you two in the crowd and went to retrieve you,” Spurge said.

Talus couldn’t speak. She had seen Currant staring at her over Spurge’s shoulder. The strawberry roan flicked her ears forward expectantly. She had no idea her surrogate parent was dead. But the longer Talus stalled, the more suspicious Currant became. Eventually the flighty young mare detached herself from the circle and approached, shaking as she drew near.

“Tell me,” she said, her voice quivering with a combination of dread and determination, “tell me what happened to Penstemon.”
Talus gazed at Currant. Her solid chestnut head looked exactly like Penstemon’s. Only the white hairs that lightened her body to the warm gray of a mourning dove’s breast indicated the two were not related. The grulla had never noticed the resemblance before. It made her even more reluctant to be the bearer of bad news.

Larkspur rescued her. He said, “Currant, the thunder-bark—the humans were putting Penstemon out of her misery. She broke down.”

Currant backpedaled. “I don’t believe you. I would have felt something the instant she fell,” she said.

“Loss doesn’t work that way.”

“What do you know about loss? Where is she? Let me go to her.”

The roan attempted to push past the dun, but he blocked her path with his muscular frame. Talus doubted Currant would have found Penstemon’s corpse even if Larkspur had allowed her to leave the group. The pen was so jam-packed the filly could not make out the site of the old mare’s death. Plus, the humans had probably already dragged the remains out of the way.

A high-pitched whinny pricked Talus’s ears. She turned in the direction of the cry. Something had spooked Bistort’s bay colt. The grulla searched for the source of his terror. When the mustangs blocking her view shifted, shocked into motion by a strange, fear-generated electricity, she saw a two-legged figure. Humans had entered the pen on horseback. They carried smooth, twig-less branches tipped with white squares that fluttered like wings.

Another sound—a low rumble—startled Talus. She looked behind her at the far end of the pen. The most bizarre creature she had ever seen approached the enclosure. It had a face that refracted the sun, a box-shaped barrel, rectangular hindquarters that attached to the rest of its
body by a tendon, and hooves that rolled like stones kicked downhill. Worse, they emitted smoke that reeked of gutted earth. The grulla tightened her muzzle, reducing her nostrils to half-moons to seal off the odor.

“What’s going on?” Talus asked.

Spurge said, “The sorting—the step before the culling. The humans separate mares, mares with foals, and stallions, then force them into the hindquarters of a nameless one.”

“The monster behind us is a nameless one? Why do we call them that?”

“Because we have no name for them. They’re too different from every other organism we know. Everyone, protect Larkspur! The two-leggeds come for the stallions right away.”

Talus glanced at Larkspur. He stood completely still, his silky black forelock, one of his few features not yet coarsened by life, hiding his eyes. Was he scared? Or angry?

“Larkspur,” Vetch said, “stay close to me. I won’t let the humans take you.” Tenderness clotted her voice.

Spurge studied Vetch. Talus couldn’t tell whether her mother envied or pitied the big brown mustang for her unusual attachment to Larkspur. “No, Vetch. He needs to get behind us or they’ll chase him into the nameless one. Larkspur, move over there, next to Currant.”

Larkspur didn’t obey Spurge at first. The grulla suspected his pride made it difficult for him to accept help from his mates. But eventually he complied. Now the horses could do nothing except hope their captors would leave him alone. The possibility was slim. Already the humans had separated a few males from the mob of horses and driven them toward the back of the pen, where the nameless one stood. Fireweed was among the first victims; Talus spotted him being ushered forward by a two-legged waving a winged branch. Sweat had darkened and whorled the
red dun’s coat. If the filly wasn’t so worried about her own fate, she would have groaned aloud at the sight of such a brave mustang under duress.

As the grulla watched in astonishment, a second human ran to the ribbed wall of the enclosure and pushed a rectangular portion of it open. The nameless one turned and backed up into the empty space. A third two-legged pulled apart the weird beast’s hindquarters. There was nothing inside. No blood, no bone, no muscle. Only a thin layer of straw.

One by one, the males charged, white-eyed, into the hindquarters. At last the humans honed in on Larkspur. They advanced atop horses that had either never known freedom or had been removed from it for many years. Talus toyed with the idea of speaking to her domesticated cousins, of appealing to their common lineage, but decided to hold her tongue after a moment’s observation. The servile, spiritless animals before her couldn’t possibly understand or empathize with wild creatures anymore. No sound besides their masters’ voices roused their lethargic ears. No touch besides that of their masters rippled their skin. They were desensitized to everything beyond human concerns, must have experienced their own equine natures as a phantom existence.

The humans urged their mounts forward at a walk. Somehow the slow approach was more menacing than an all-out charge. Talus’s pulse accelerated. She took a series of deep breaths to calm down. Nothing happened. Her heart continued to beat with such abandon she thought it had been set free in her chest. But she couldn’t move. She couldn’t. If the band spread apart, Larkspur would be an easy target.

“Don’t let them intimidate you,” Spurge said to the group at large. “They want us to scatter.”

Vetch added, “Anyone who breaks rank will feel my hooves.”
A male human spoke. His voice made Talus flinch, not because it was loud, but because it consisted of units of sound that worked together in a strange and terrible logic. No other animal communicated in this fashion. If a bird dive-bombed Talus, she backed away, understanding that she had ventured too close to an egg-laden nest. If a mouse squeaked at her, she planted her feet with special care lest she trample a burrow. Only the two-legged monsters defied interpretation, existed in an alien sphere.

At the male’s command, the humans lifted their winged branches—the white squares snapped in the wind, producing a sound reminiscent of leaf litter crackling in a forest fire—and kicked their horses. The entire horrific party trotted toward the mustangs. Talus glanced at Spurge for guidance. The black mare stared straight ahead, her sleek body trembling on the verge of flight. Oddly, the grulla remembered her mother was pregnant, a fact she had not acknowledged for several months. Had the unborn foal survived the race to the pen? Or had it died in the gory darkness of Spurge’s belly, crushed by life before it had even joined the living?

The humans reached the band in a flurry of dust and winged branches. Talus ran. They all did, their allegiance to Larkspur swept aside by fear. When the band pressed up against the right side of the pen, where Bistort’s and the gray’s mates also huddled, Talus searched for Larkspur. She spied him being herded into the nameless one. The big dun looked over his shoulder once before the humans forced him to join the other males. He seemed to be hunting for his family. The intensity of his gaze said, “I’ll find you. We’ll gallop together through the sagebrush when this ordeal is over.”

The dominant male human closed the hindquarters behind Larkspur and the nameless one cantered off, its odd hooves spinning. A subordinate two-legged shut the rectangular portion of the wall. Now not a single stallion remained. The mustangs clustered together in shock. Some
coughed, their lungs inflamed by the grueling journey to the clay barrens. Others blew dust from their nostrils. Periodically a forlorn mare called for her mate. The smell of grief, a musk like rain, rose from the horses’ coats into the air. Talus could almost feel the scent leaving her hide. She wasn’t surprised by the scale of her sorrow, by its physical expression. The pause in the action gave her time to reflect on everything she had lost in a few short hours. Her freedom. Her father. Penstemon. And more suffering lay ahead.
When the mares’ shock at losing their stallions wore off, Talus asked, “Where have the humans taken the males?”

“To a stand. A stand of pens, not trees. That’s where the culling will occur,” Spurge explained. “They’ll transport us there, too.”

“If we’re all going to the same place, why do the two-leggeds separate us?”

Spurge considered the question. “Well, mares and foals would get hurt if the humans put them in a nameless one’s hindquarters with a bunch of angry stallions. But it’s more than that. We’re easier to control once our family ties are severed. Once sorrow disorients us.”

Talus’s strength, already depleted, rushed from her, leaving her body cold and empty. The black mustang’s words disturbed the grulla even more than the winged branches and nameless ones. Any animal could use force, but few possessed the intelligence to plan the breakup of friend from friend, mate from mate, parent from offspring. Only a mind too complex for its own good—and the good of every life form in its power—could conceive of such wickedness.

“Spurge,” Milfoil said urgently, “another nameless one has arrived.”

Vetch added, “It’s smaller than the first. The humans will probably go after the mares without foals next; there are fewer of them.”

Talus whirled to look at the second square-faced, round-hooved monster. It was short compared to its predecessor. Otherwise, they appeared identical. When the creature backed up, ready for the two-leggeds to open its hindquarters, the filly turned away. She couldn’t bear to gaze at the nameless one now that she knew its evil purpose.
“Currant, if Vetch is right, you’re in danger. Move to the center of the band so we can defend you,” Spurge said.

The strawberry roan didn’t respond. She simply stared into space as if grief had blinded her, as if light itself had vanished with Penstemon.

Milfoil cried, “Obey your lead mare! She’s the wisest of us all!”

Currant’s eyes regained their focus and glistened like a wet stone. “Wisdom won’t save us. If the two-leggeds come for me, you’ll run,” she snapped. “You’ll abandon me as you abandoned the sire of your foals. But, of course, you couldn’t help it. Even Spurge and Vetch fled before the strange branches.”

S purge snorted in anger; Talus suspected her dam was more upset by the truth of Currant’s words than anything. “So? We still ought to resist the humans as long as we can. Now do what I say!”

“No,” Currant said. “You can’t make me.”

Without warning, the black mare charged the strawberry roan, herding her into the middle of the group with savage, skin-tearing bites. Talus didn’t know her mother could be so vicious. So ugly. The grulla looked away, but it was too late. She had seen fury change Spurge’s face. She would never forget it.

The horses, gathered around the stunned and bleeding Currant, steeled themselves for the two-leggeds’ next onslaught. It didn’t materialize. After three foal-less mares from the gray’s band vanished into the round-footed monster, the humans closed its hindquarters and sent it on its journey to the Stand. Apparently separating Currant from her family wasn’t worth the effort, not with a duo as powerful as Spurge and Vetch among her defenders. Aster, too, avoided capture—in her case, Lupine’s dam, Thistle, afforded protection.
“Well, at least we’ll be together until we reach the Stand,” Milfoil said, nuzzling Currant to apologize for her harsh behavior. Spurge’s ears flicked back and forth guiltily, but she remained silent. Talus had assumed her stubbornness came from Larkspur. Now she suspected her dam had something to do with it as well.

An ominous hush descended on the pen. Every mare and foal in the enclosure grew still. Only their sweaty hides quivered, releasing steam as thick as vapor smoking from a hot spring. The steam mingled with windblown dust. Together they formed a pale brown cloud. A kind of dirty ghost. Talus watched it feather apart, re-form, and feather apart. It horrified her because it was the product of her exhaustion and because it represented the last calm moment before the next nameless one arrived. The nameless one that would carry the remaining mustangs to the Stand.

Spurge glanced at Vetch, Milfoil, and Currant. “Flank the foals when the humans drive us into the hindquarters. It will be so crowded in there they might get stepped on or even crushed,” she said.

Vetch and Milfoil pricked their ears in assent. Currant, who had fallen into a grief-induced stupor once again, didn’t react. Meanwhile the three little ones pawed the ground.

Talus had never felt so small before, not even when she, long-limbed and wobble-legged, made her way from her birth meadow to the valley on the first day of her life. Her lungs inflated with every frenzied breath, pushing her ribs farther apart and reminding her how tiny her barrel was compared to an adult mustang’s. She wished her bones would spring outward, that she would grow to fill them until she became too solid to knock over. To trample. To kill in a moment of white-eyed, tossed head panic.
“Draba,” Bitterroot said, sizing up his undersized sister, “stay close to me. I’ll protect you.”

Talus glared at the dun colt. Though he had a sturdier build than the fillies, he wasn’t large enough to keep them safe. Yet Draba nuzzled him in gratitude. Jealousy lit a fire in the grulla’s gut. She listened to the flames crackle from a great distance, amazed that she could experience envy under the circumstances.

“Here comes the next nameless one,” Milfoil said.

Spurge cried, “Surround the foals!”

Talus glimpsed the latest monster nearing the pen. It was bigger than the previous two. Far bigger. The humans, it appeared, intended to drive all the horses into the nameless one’s massive hindquarters. A second later, Vetch’s burly body obscured the grulla’s view. Somehow her inability to see the threat rendered it more terrifying.

Inside the living cage formed by their dams, Talus, Bitterroot, and Draba worked their ears, putting together an auditory portrait of the next stage of the roundup. A creak told them the humans had opened the nameless one, a muted snap that a winged branch had caught the wind. As the young mustangs monitored the proceedings, they pressed against each other for comfort. Talus inhaled her siblings’ unique scents. Bitterroot, like Vetch, smelled of damp, heavy soil. Draba had inherited Milfoil’s clovery aura. But both also emitted the burnt mint odor of sagebrush—Larkspur’s olfactory signature. The grulla, too, possessed the stallion’s rough perfume (tempered by Spurge’s grassy aroma). Love sealed her throat. Draba and Bitterroot were more than bandmates. More than family. They belonged to her and she belonged to them. The proof wafted from their hides.

“Bitterroot,” Talus said, her jealousy sputtering, “that day in the sagebrush scrub—”
Terror turned the pen into a mass of flying forelocks, white-rimmed eyes, and flinty hooves before the grulla could complete her apology. The humans had begun to drive the horses toward the back of the pen, where the nameless one waited to receive them. Spurge, Vetch, Milfoil, and even the still dazed Currant fought the equine tide as long as they could, struggling to maintain the circle they had formed around the foals. Talus experienced the adults’ efforts to protect her as a string of images. Spurge, the lather on her flanks bright as snow against her black coat, reared like a stallion. Vetch swung her massive hindquarters into the chest of one of Bistort’s bay mares, winding her. Milfoil and Currant bared their teeth at any mustang who ventured too close to the little ones. In the end, the mares succumbed, not to their fellow captives, but to panic. When the bloody stench of the humans drew near enough to make their eyes stream, they wheeled and joined the retreat. The youngsters sprang after them.

“Talus,” Spurge said, “don’t leave my side.”

The grulla didn’t need to be told to stay with her mother. In the crush of frightened horses, Spurge’s dark form shimmered like a spring in the sagebrush scrub. Like the promise of a long pull of water after a hard run. In this case, the promise of safety. Talus attached herself to her parent and defended her position with a ferocity she had never displayed before. When the gray’s colt, separated from his own dam, gravitated toward Spurge, the filly lashed out with her front hooves, catching him in the ribs and sending him reeling in the opposite direction. Behind her, Bitterroot and Draba did the same; she could hear their squeals of rage. It seemed roundups could warp even the gentle natures of foals. So be it. She refused to lose contact with her mother. To enter the nameless one at the mercy of mature mustangs who could deliver mature blows.

Unable to see past the many bodies ahead of her, Talus didn’t know she had dashed into the monster’s hindquarters until her feet struck metal. Horror worked its way through her gut like
chain lightning. She leaped to the left and bounced off Spurge’s barrel. She leaped to the right and bounced off cold, silver muscle. Shocked by the impact, she tossed her head until her mind cleared. In the dim light—there were a series of square apertures in the hindquarters, but they didn’t let in much sun—horses panicked. Thistle battered the nameless one, ramming its fleshless flesh with her shoulder. The resulting echo scared several mares and foals. They spun and bucked. Bistort’s bay daughter, trapped between two particularly distressed animals, dropped to her knees. Only her mother’s quick reaction saved her from being stomped to death. Just when serious injury appeared inevitable, a clear, commanding voice quieted the mustangs. Talus identified the speaker immediately. It was Aster.

“Control yourselves!” the silver buckskin cried from the fore of the hindquarters. “Do you want to step on a foal or break a bone? You will if you keep up this nonsense. Remain calm and we’ll at least get to the Stand unscathed.”

The silver buckskin’s words arrested the horses. One by one they stilled, their movements reduced to a tremble. Talus thought of leaves after the wind blows through them. For several seconds, they continue to quiver, stung by a memory of cold. In the momentary calm, the grulla located her family members. Somehow Vetch and Milfoil had ended up near the front of the hindquarters though they had been among the last to enter the nameless one. Bitterroot and Draba pressed against them for comfort. Both foals looked rattled but unhurt. Talus glanced over her withers and saw Currant’s dove-colored body in the crush behind Spurge.

“I think everyone’s okay,” the young mustang said to her dam.

“Yes,” the black mare said, “thanks to Aster.”

“What happens next?”
“The humans will deliver us to the Stand. We’ll run through a long, narrow, curving pen—a kind of tail—into a wider enclosure. That’s where the culling will occur. More nameless ones will take the mustangs the two-leggeds decide to keep to...another place.”

“Another place?”

“Only the culled know where and what it is. I can’t tell you more.”

Before Talus could reply, the hindquarters lurched into motion. Jostled without warning, the filly stumbled, sought purchase on the silver floor in vain, and fell to the left. Spurge shoved her upright with a sweaty shoulder. The grulla splayed her legs to maintain her balance. Fortunately, the nameless one settled into an even rhythm. Talus recovered; she had never encountered such a gliding gait. Instead of the bend-and-reach stride of a horse or the stiff, springy tread of a pronghorn, the round-footed monster skimmed the ground. And it did so at a speed no animal could attain.

The black mare spoke with such yearning for the wild that the grulla went silent. She, too, pictured the mountain. Pictured everything about it she would miss. The lengthening of sunlight at dawn. The lengthening of shadow at dusk. Finches singing bright songs in the treetops. Sweetness at the center of a wildflower. Talus couldn’t conceive of life without these beauties. In a few hours, she might have to.
The nameless one slowed, halted, and reversed. Inside its hindquarters, the mustangs pricked their ears, straining to hear their way into an understanding of the activity beyond their prison. Talus detected human footfalls, equine cries of sorrow, and the clang of pens being opened or shut. She glanced at Spurge.

“Talus,” the black mare said, her breath shallow with fear, “keep close. When the humans let us out, we must run through the tail of the pen so we don’t get caught in the crowd and injured. Once the tail widens into a larger enclosure, we’ll be safe—until the culling, anyway. Do you understand?”

The grulla said, “Yes. I won’t hold up the horses behind us.”

“Don’t let your attention wander either. The stallions and foal-less mares will be in pens next to ours. Whatever you do, don’t stall to look for your father, Bistort, or your bachelor friends.”

Talus assented with her ears. A second later, the two-leggeds pried apart the monster’s hindquarters and stepped aside, clearing the way for the mustangs. Spurge leaped from the silver hold into the bright sunlight. The grulla followed. At first, she couldn’t see where she was going; her eyes, dazzled by the intensity of the external world, refused to focus on anything except the black mare. However, as her sight adjusted to the change, she began to make sense of her surroundings. The walls of the tail, ribbed like those of every pen she had encountered, glistened to the left and right. Only a horse length separated them. She had no choice but to proceed though that narrow passage, turning when it turned, straightening when it straightened. Her fellow captives did the same. Occasionally a flighty individual spooked at an imagined enemy
and veered into the edge of the enclosure. Talus watched in horror as Currant suffered just such a collision, shook herself, and galloped on.

An array of sounds also reached the grulla. Humans on the outside of the tail walls waved winged branches, filling the air with an awful flapping noise and driving the mustangs forward at a quicker pace. Stallions scented their mares, then called to them. A fierce wind, unchecked by the flat, treeless land on which the Stand sat, struck the pen at high speed and whistled as it passed through each gleaming rib. Talus pinned her ears in an attempt to mute the cacophony. It bore through her pinnae and entered her head despite her efforts.

At last the horses barreled into the large enclosure. The grulla’s muscles slackened in relief. No herd animal could cope with tight quarters under duress for long. She slowed to a trot, reveling in the extra space. Spurge jogged next to her. Both scanned the pen for their bandmates.

“Milfoil, Vetch, we’re over here!” the black mare cried after a few desperate moments.

Talus wheeled in the direction of her mother’s voice in time to see the dunalino and the chocolate-colored mare fighting to reach their bandmates. Their foals trailed after them, reluctant to advance until the way was clear. Both Draba and Bitterroot had been knocked around during the run through the tail; the filly sported a limp and the colt, browned by hoof-tossed dirt, looked more like a tumbleweed than a horse.

“Thank goodness we made it out,” Milfoil said when she neared Spurge. “Draba almost went to her knees.”

“Bitterroot, too. One of the gray’s mares rammed into him from behind. Where is she? You can’t push around my son without consequences,” Vetch said, searching for the offender.

“Don’t lose your temper. We need to find Currant and keep the little ones calm,” Spurge said. She cast about, located the young mare, and called, “Currant! Currant, it’s us!”
The strawberry roan joined her family. Reunited, the bandmates inspected their latest jail. They were in the biggest of three adjacent pens. The females without offspring occupied the enclosure to their left, the males the one to their right. Talus saw Larkspur standing with his head high and his ears pricked, trying to locate his bandmates among the new arrivals. She hoped he would find her and watch over her from a distance. It would give her the illusion of protection. An illusion she yearned for with everything in her. Yearned for until her heart seemed to flood her chest. To turn to blood and lap against the inside of her body like a tide.

Draba must have been engrossed in similar thoughts. She said to Talus and Bitterroot, between wheezes, “I can see Mount Mesteño. Why aren’t we there? Why aren’t we safe?”

The grulla didn’t respond. Instead, she followed her sister’s gaze to the west, where, miles of shrub-flecked land away, the mountain loomed. It resembled a coyote’s tooth. A tooth set in wild gums. Her spirit galloped back along the path the nameless one had taken, back to the first pen glittering in the clay barrens, back to the sagebrush and the junipers and the bunchgrass. Back to her early days, when her stride was uncertain, her mind untroubled, her joy unrestrained.

The filly herself stayed in the enclosure, waiting for the culling to begin.
CHAPTER 15

Two more nameless ones arrived an hour later. Talus knew they had come from what her mother called “Another Place” because they stank of fear and grief. Of mustangs who had lost their freedom forever. Of the culled. The first monster stopped at the stallion pen, aligned its hindquarters with a section of the wall that could be swung open, and waited to be filled with victims. Talus glanced at Spurge nervously, but the black horse’s attention lay elsewhere. Aster had approached.

“If we watch carefully, we may be able to figure out this year’s pattern. Let’s hope it doesn’t apply to Larkspur and Bistort,” the silver buckskin said.

Talus gazed through the shared fence at the stallions. Larkspur studied the nameless ones, ears pricked, battered hide quivering with restrained energy. Nearby Bistort paced. His coat shimmered between black and copper. The filly felt queasy. Would her sire be coveted for his strength, her brother for his beauty? How would that affect her? Were grulla fillies also valuable by her captors’ standards?

The first victim was Rimrock. The humans singled him out, cut him from the group on horseback, and chased him into the round-footed beast. Fireweed and Greasewood whinnied. A reply sailed out of the square apertures in the flesh-drained hindquarters.

Milfoil said, “Chestnuts! They want chestnuts!”

“No,” Vetch said, “Rimrock’s broad blaze attracted them. They’re after horses with unusual markings.”

“Then we’re safe. Only Talus has a star and I wouldn’t call it unusual, would you?”

“I don’t care if it is—we can afford to lose her. She got us into this mess.”
Talus ignored Vetch, but Draba reacted. The dunalino rubbed her nose against her sister’s forehead. After a moment, the grulla understood. Her star would be less visible smeared with dirt. She licked Draba in gratitude. Then a terrified neigh diverted her attention. The humans had selected another stallion: a bay the grulla didn’t recognize. He must have been caught at a different site—she would have noticed if he had also come in from the clay barrens. More importantly, he lacked even a speck of white. Consternation traveled from mare to mare. Talus exchanged confused glances with Draba. Suddenly an awful thought slowed her pulse. She interrupted Spurge, who had been talking to Aster in an urgent whisper.

“Mother, was that bay a band stallion or a bachelor?” Talus demanded.

Spurge said, “A bachelor. Anyway—”


“What if the humans are after young mustangs? Mustangs they can ride for a long time,” the filly said.

Spurge and Aster made horrified eye contact. A second later, the silver buckskin returned to her bandmates, crying, “Everyone under five, stay alert! Both the chestnut and the bay were immature!” Her voice carried across the pen.

Instantly, Spurge, Vetch, Milfoil, and Currant formed a circle around the foals. A third stallion dashed into the nameless one with branch-waving humans in his wake. Filled to capacity, the weird beast departed. Now only two sub-adult males remained in the adjoining pen: Fireweed and Greasewood. Talus looked away, unable to watch them lose their freedom. A moment later, Milfoil gasped.

The grulla spun around to see Fireweed running along the perimeter of the enclosure. He accelerated from a canter to a gallop to a sprint, his red mane lifted by the force of his charge, his
tail flung out behind him. After almost a complete lap, he reached top speed and set a course for the right wall of the pen. Larkspur, Bistort, and the gray scattered. Several humans shouted. Fireweed ignored them. He pinned his ears, gathered his energy, and launched himself into the air. Resolve carried him over the barrier, but his physical limitations reasserted themselves before he reached the ground. His rear hooves struck metal. He tumbled, hitting the earth with a thud that reverberated in Talus’s heart. The bachelor did not move. For a minute, no one uttered a word.

“His neck must be broken,” Milfoil said at last.

“Well, it was a brave death,” Vetch said. “To attempt a jump like that!”

Talus stared at the red dun’s limp form. Fireweed wasn’t dead. He wasn’t. No horse with his vitality, his determination to live on his own terms, could be killed by a mere fall. Draba nuzzled Talus. The gesture made the tragedy real. Both fillies lowered their heads in sorrow.

“Wait! I think he’s still alive!” Spurge cried.

Talus raised her head. Fireweed was struggling to rise. He rolled from his side into a resting position, reached with his forelegs, pushed with his hind, and stood. For a moment, he remained in place, quivering as if stunned by his own intactness. Then Greasewood nickered a warning. Two humans had run to their mounts. Fireweed wheeled and galloped off toward Mount Mesteño, his strides ginger but swift. By the time the humans had climbed aboard their horses, the red dun was far away. Safe. A creature of the sagebrush for at least a few more years.

The grulla sagged with relief. Draba supported her. When Talus glanced over her sister’s withers into the stallion pen, she saw Greasewood watching Fireweed recede and disappear. She pitied the snip-nosed bay. His last act as a mustang had been to alert his friend to danger. That meant something. She didn’t know what.
The humans forced Greasewood into the nameless one. Larkspur, Bistort, and the gray milled about in the adjacent enclosure, their bodies animated by a new tension: concern for offspring. Larkspur inspected the shared fence, trying to poke his muzzle through the ribs. Talus wondered if he wanted to touch noses with her, Draba, and Bitterroot. The thought aroused the same peculiar pain she had felt when the dun looked at Milfoil in utter helplessness before the bird drove them out of the scrubland.

“They’ll come for us soon,” Spurge said.

“Will they take all the young mares and foals? They didn’t leave a single bachelor,” Milfoil said.

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, Spurge, if they steal our daughters…I won’t be able to bear it. I won’t.”

The mares turned to gaze at their offspring. Talus and Draba pricked their ears. The grulla guessed her mother was committing her scent, her conformation, and every nuance of her coat to memory. That Milfoil was doing likewise with Draba. The act seemed futile. To remember and to possess could not be more different.

A nameless one backed up beside the middle pen. The male human from the clay barrens opened its hindquarters, then led his associates into the enclosure on horseback. The two-leggeds targeted Aster’s party first, separating Bistort’s bay filly from her dam. But a second later, they let the bay go and went after Lupine instead. He ducked behind Thistle. She turned in a circle, attempting to shield her son. It was no use. The humans spooked her with their branches, set upon Lupine, and herded him into the nameless one’s yawning hindquarters.

Milfoil asked, “Why didn’t they want the bay?”

“She’s too weak to make a good riding horse,” Vetch said.
“Unless,” Spurge said, “they just want young males.”

The black mare’s words had an immediate effect—the entire band encircled Bitterroot. Talus studied her brother. He seemed more surprised than afraid. The grulla recalled the sense of unity that had flowed through her and her siblings as they traveled to Willow Creek. They had known then they would fight for each other if need be. It appeared the time had come to fight for Bitterroot.

The humans drove the foals from their mothers one by one. Bistort’s bay son and the gray’s colt joined Lupine in the hindquarters. All three lifted their muzzles to the square apertures and called to their family members. Their dams ran or bucked, movement their sole comfort. Occasionally the stallions also reacted. Bistort jogged in a circle, whinnied, and jogged once again. The gray churned the dirt with his right front hoof.

The outpouring of sorrow transformed Bitterroot’s shock into terror. He bobbed his head and switched his tail. Sweat dampened his loins. It smelled like grass, like the contents of a mustang’s stomach distilled into a rank perfume. Talus shuddered. Fear had turned her brother inside out.

“Calm down, Bitterroot,” Vetch snapped. “The humans will notice you if you keep acting up.”

Milfoil added, “She’s right, dear. Stay still and maybe they’ll forget about you.”

“No such luck,” Spurge said.

Talus peered around the black mare. Several humans advanced. Their bizarre, close-set eyes scanned the group. The grulla retreated. Perhaps if she, Bitterroot, and Draba hid, the two-leggeds would think they had made a mistake, that only adult mustangs stood before them. It was worth a try.
“Everyone, hold your ground as long as you can,” Spurge said.

Vetch glanced at Bitterroot. “I won’t let the humans take you. I won’t.”

For an instant the dun colt’s panic subsided. He stared at his mother in gratitude. Talus wondered if the brown mare’s vow was the nearest she had ever come to telling her foal she loved him. But there was no time for sentimentality. The grulla flanked Bitterroot. Draba did the same. If the humans scattered the grown horses, they would be their sibling’s last line of defense.

The humans pulled up their mounts to assess the situation. The male waved his branch, ushering the others forward. They approached at a canter. The mustangs fought the urge to flee. Instinct chipped away at their resolve. Nothing in their bloodlines, in the generations their ancestors had spent flying for their lives at the first sign of danger, had prepared them for this. Unable to remain stationary a second longer, the horses charged off in every direction. Talus found herself racing out of the humans’ path with Draba and Bitterroot behind her.

“Make for Aster’s band. We’ll be harder to capture in a group,” she cried.

The foals sprinted toward the silver buckskin. Though still mourning her own losses, the old mare realized what they were trying to do and encouraged them with a toss of her forelock. Talus accelerated, but the sound of shod hooves grew louder with each stride. She looked over her shoulder. A human on a cremello stallion had almost drawn even with them. The grulla doubled in an attempt to shake the rider. She wasn’t fast enough. Not after covering so many miles in one day. A moment later, a winged branch fluttered in her face, forcing her to change course.

Talus nearly crashed into a liver chestnut colt carrying a second human. She wheeled around to see the cremello bearing down on Draba and Bitterroot. There was nowhere to go. The foals cast about for their mothers. Spurge, Milfoil, and Vetch squealed with rage at the opposite
end of the pen. Every time they tried to run to their offspring, the enemy drove them back against the fence. Meanwhile, in the adjacent enclosure, Larkspur bellowed, his voice so thick with anger at not being able to help his young ones it shook the air. Talus and her siblings were on their own.

The grulla faced the humans with hatred in her gut. The hairless monsters had haunted her since Willow Creek, had darkened her life like the blackness that clawed its way across Mount Mesteño every evening. She had found them in shadows. In windblown tree branches. In the rustle of a bird magnified by swaying vegetation. They had terrified her because they lacked definition, were promises of danger rather than the thing itself. Yet now they confronted her as flesh-and-blood creatures who had taken a flesh-and-blood toll on her family. Penstemon was dead. Currant was dead inside. Draba might never draw a deep breath again.

Talus turned and lashed out with her hind legs as hard as she could. Her hooves connected with the liver chestnut’s flanks. He reared, threatening to send the human on his back tumbling to the ground. The grulla tried to lead the other foals past him, but he returned to all fours, barring their way. Only a meter stood between him and Talus. She could see the cream-colored whites of his eyes, the veins running parallel to the bridge of his nose, the bulb of pink flesh buried within his nostrils...He was as scared as any of the mustangs. The revelation startled Talus after her previous assessment of the humans’ horses. Was causing pain as terrible as feeling it?

“Talus!” Draba cried. “Talus, we need you!”

The grulla whirled around to find the cremello stallion herding Bitterroot toward the nameless one. She hurried to Draba. Together the fillies attempted to wedge themselves between their brother and his assailant. A third human galloped up on a piebald mare to drive off the
unwanted youngsters. Talus shriilled a warning to Draba. The next instant, a winged branch flapped in their faces, turning them against their will. They streaked across the pen toward their dams.

Talus glanced over her shoulder. The cremello, the liver chestnut, and the piebald had surrounded Bitterroot. In his final seconds of freedom, he lived up to his mother’s expectations for the first time ever. The dun colt pinned his ears, planted his feet, and refused to enter the nameless one’s hindquarters. Eventually the humans had to strike him with their branches to get him to submit to their demands. He vanished with a piercing whinny. The sound contained all the heartbreak in the world.

Talus and Draba reached their bandmates. The grulla stared at Spurge. Spurge stared right back. There was nothing they could say, nothing they could do to make everything okay.

“Mother, I couldn’t help him. I did my best, but I couldn’t help him,” Talus said after a pause.

“No horse could have helped him,” Spurge said. “No horse.”

The mustangs looked at Vetch. Waves of sorrow rolled through her great brown body. They originated from her withers, spread to her barrel, and ebbed in her croup. Talus’s lungs constricted with horror. Grown mares were not supposed to tremble like newborns overpowered by their first taste of life. Especially not grown mares as tough as Vetch. The filly pressed her face against Spurge’s glossy black neck for comfort.

“Vetch? Vetch, can you hear me?” Milfoil asked, prodding the larger horse with her muzzle to elicit a response.

Spurge said, “Milfoil, leave her alone. She’s in shock. Let her accept the loss of her son at her own pace.”
“Oh, Spurge. Poor Bitterroot. What will become of him?”

“We may never know.”

The friends gazed at one another. Talus thought she saw relief break the surface of their anguish. They couldn’t mourn Bitterroot completely. Not when his capture had ensured their daughters’ release. Unease filled the grulla. She lashed her tail to relieve tension.

The nameless one departed. Thistle and the other bereaved mothers gathered at the fence to call to their offspring. A reply emanated from the hindquarters. Talus checked on Vetch. The brown mare had not moved. She seemed too stupefied to do anything but quake. In the mean time, the humans were taking Bitterroot far away.

“Mother, Vetch will miss her chance to say goodbye,” Talus said.

Spurge approached Vetch, hesitated, and nuzzled her. The burly mustang’s eyes cleared. At last she understood what had happened to her baby. In a flash, she was at the other end of the pen, muscling aside Thistle to get as close to the receding nameless one as possible.

“Bitterroot!” she cried. “Bitterroot, be brave! Bitterroot, I love you!”

Talus pushed her ears forward, listening for an answer. None came. She could only hope the wind had carried Vetch’s words to the dun colt, that he had left Mount Mesteño aware of how much his mother cared.
The roundup was over. Only a single trial remained: the journey home. As the nameless ones that had delivered the mustangs to the Stand lined up next to the pens, Talus searched her heart for emotion. Nothing. The worst had happened. Bitterroot would never again gallop across the valley or wind his way through the juniper belt. In light of this tragedy, what was there to fear? What could the humans possibly do to increase their victims’ sorrow? Not even the death of Spurge would have elicited a response from Talus. Pain has a saturation point. She had reached it.

So had the other horses. When the humans drove Larkspur, Bistort, and the gray into the nameless one reserved for stallions, the mares didn’t whinny to their mates, the foals to their sires. They simply stood in place, coughing or blowing air out of their nostrils to expel the dirt they had inhaled during the culling. Talus deemed this throat and sinus-clearing the most depressing sound she had ever heard. It possessed a texture, a roughness that matched the events of the day. She rotated her ears in an attempt to find a more pleasant noise to focus on; the brazen complaint of a jay would have sounded sweet in comparison. Human voices alone vied with the awful hacking.

The mares and remaining foals barely reacted even when a pair of humans entered their pen to herd them into the nameless one. They simply let the winged branches dictate their movements. For Talus, the surrender was a relief. Her mind grew calm as undisturbed snow, her heartbeat regular as the flow of a rain-widened stream, her strides perfunctory as the blooming of a flower.
In this vacant state, Talus accompanied Spurge into the nameless one. The black mare pinned her ears and tensed her muzzle to warn off the other females. Her aggression proved unnecessary. None of Bistort’s or the gray’s mates had enough energy to panic, much less trample a foal. Besides, the culling had freed up space in the hindquarters; there was no need to compete for room now. Spurge and Talus came to a stop next to Aster. A moment later, the two dunalinos joined them. Vetch and Currant, slowed by grief, entered last. As soon as they did, the humans shut the nameless one, throwing the mustangs into darkness except for the strips of light visible through the apertures in the walls.

When the beast’s round hooves began to spin, the grulla was ready. She spread her legs, braced herself, and maintained her balance. The rest of the captives also remained on their feet. It seemed the horses had learned from their ordeal. But did knowledge of the humans’ ways matter anymore? The information that would have helped the mustangs cope had arrived too late.

Talus’s throat and chest tightened with bitterness in spite of her lack of emotion.

During the trip back to Mount Mesteño, the grulla studied the mares closest to her: Aster and her companions. The silver buckskin appeared less stunned than her bandmates, but sorrow billowed from her coat, filling the air around her with the heaviness of rain. To the right, the bay who had lost her colt blinked unfocused eyes. Talus wondered if those eyes registered anything other than the youngster’s retreating figure, if anguish inflicted its victims with a kind of selective blindness. To the left, Thistle stood with her head between her knees. All the arrogance she had displayed in the sagebrush scrub had vanished. Without it, she looked diminished.

“Talus,” Spurge said, lowering her muzzle to whisper in her daughter’s ear, “don’t stare. Just be thankful you aren’t the foal being mourned.”
The grulla examined her mother, whose hide, illuminated by a sunshaft, shimmered like a grackle’s feathers. Spurge’s beauty affected Talus even more than usual. Her apathy fell away bit by bit. An intense desire to return to the mountain supplant ed it. There, among the meadows and swales, the chaparral and the bunchgrass, she could heal. Could inhale the astringent yet restorative odor of the junipers until her nose rid itself of the hateful odor of the two-leggeds.

“Mother, are we almost home?” she asked.

“Yes. Be patient, my little one. You’ll feel the wind in your mane again before the end of the day.”

Talus’s pulse quickened. For the moment, she forgot the roundup and its consequences. Instead, she pictured Mount Mesteño waiting, huge, grave, and exquisite, to greet its stolen offspring. To welcome them back to its hidden places. The grulla could smell the increasingly brittle snowbanks, the new growth shunting aside the old, the leaf litter where robins scratched at the earth in their perennial search for food…
CHAPTER 17

The nameless one stopped in the clay barrens, not far from the original capture site. Inside the bloodless hindquarters, the mustangs stiffened and pricked their ears. They heard human footfalls approach the rear of their prison. A second later, sunlight dazzled their eyes and sagebrush charmed their nostrils. The path to the mountain was clear. As soon as Vetch, Currant, and the rest of the mares close to the exit stepped into the open, Talus rushed forward. So did Draba. Before the sisters had put more than a few horse lengths between them and the round-footed beast, their mothers nickered in alarm. The grulla pulled up, the dunalino at her hip.

“Don’t go any farther,” Spurge cried, drawing even with the fillies. “If we don’t stay together, a strange stallion may claim us before we reunit with Larkspur.”

Talus looked around. Vetch and Currant stood to one side of the foals, Spurge and Milfoil on the other. North of the females, Larkspur, Bistort, and the gray paced while waiting for their families. Their movements, kinetic though loose with exhaustion, broadcast their eagerness to steal any mare separated from her band during the release. Talus pinned her ears. She couldn’t believe the usual conflicts between mustangs had resumed so quickly. Then again, the horses of Mount Mesteño had shown little solidarity during the roundup. Fear had turned them against each other. Made them monstrous.

“What should we do?” Talus asked.

“First, we need to get Vetch and Currant ready for the trip home,” Spurge answered.

The black mare roused Vetch from a sorrowful trance with a light nip to the hindquarters. Milfoil did the same to Currant. The bereaved mares cranked their heads up as if surprised to
find themselves still among the living. Talus understood the sentiment. Spurge was her
Bitterroot. Her Penstemon. The point beyond which all experience stopped—or ought to stop.

“Spurge, Larkspur will have his rivals under control soon,” Milfoil said.

Talus gazed across the barrens. The battle-scarred dun was walking toward his rivals with
his neck arched and his tail raised. Bistort backed away submissively, but the gray lingered, his
eyes fixed on Spurge. He didn’t retreat until Larkspur extended a foreleg in an ominous threat
display. Even at the end of a stressful day, the great stallion radiated power.

Spurge said, “All right, everyone. On my signal, run to Larkspur.”

The black mare galloped to her mate with her band members on her heels. They passed
the other females, joined Larkspur, and set a course for the alpine zone. Spurge slowed to a
nimble walk as soon as the group distanced the competing males. Talus trembled with relief. She
never wanted to break out of a sedate canter again. Spurge must have sensed her daughter’s
exhaustion; she let the grulla lag at the rear with Draba.

For a long time, the fillies traveled side by side without speaking. Talus was too shocked
by Penstemon’s death and Bitterroot’s capture to say anything. Draba, judging by her wheezing,
lacked the breath to express her thoughts. But when the sagebrush scrub appeared, dark gray in
the late afternoon light but otherwise unchanged, the dunalino’s coat emitted the rain-like odor of
sadness. Talus paused to assess her sister.

“Draba, what’s the matter? Talk to me,” the grulla said.


Talus studied her surroundings. She had always considered the mountain more than a
location. More than a home. It was her friend. A playmate spun of bunchgrass and junipers and
aspens. A being that gifted her with leaf music and birdsong as a token of affection. Now she
saw the earth in its true form: an organism too different from the animals that scampered across its enormous face to care about their losses. Bitterroot would never know the joy of racing an alpine wind ever again. Penstemon would never know anything ever again. Yet the spring shimmered and scalloped in the breeze as if all was well.

“Talus, Draba, don’t fall too far behind,” Larkspur said, sending the foals trotting after their mothers with a swing of his head.

Spurge and Milfoil were speaking quietly at the front of the band. Talus checked when she overheard the subject of their conversation: her dash for cover. The grulla shadowed the mares, flattening her ears to tell Draba to do likewise. Together they inched close enough to eavesdrop.

Milfoil said, “The humans would have flushed us from the trees with or without Talus. She wasn’t the only one ready to bolt.”

“No, but she was the only one who chose to bolt,” Spurge said.

“She’s young. All fillies are quick to take fright.”

“She didn’t take fright, though. She really believed she could lead us to safety. Can you imagine having that kind of arrogance at under a year old? But it’s my fault. I let everyone make a fuss over her from the day she was born. No wonder she thinks she can do anything.”

“So you’re not a perfect parent. Who is? Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“Oh, Milfoil, I’ve never been more disappointed in a foal.”

Talus pulled up abruptly. Draba also halted. The grulla sensed her sister’s concern yet refused to acknowledge it. She was too dazed and too hurt. Even the smallest gesture of sympathy—a nudge from Draba’s soft nose—might bring her to pieces. After a moment, the half-grown mustangs simply plodded on in silence.
As the sagebrush scrub yielded to the juniper belt, Talus’s grief deepened to shame. How could she have thought she could outpace a silver bird? And had her foolishness cost Penstemon her life, Bitterroot his freedom, and Draba her health? She hoped Milfoil was right, that the humans would have caught the band no matter what. But she would never know for sure. That would be her tragedy. The sorrow that would walk beside her until she died. Everyone carried a similar burden. Few assumed theirs before their first birthday.

By the time the horses reached the riparian meadow in the alpine zone, the sun had set. Talus watched the sky dim from the pale gray of winterkilled grass to the deep black of hoof-churned dirt. Her heart swelled with a perverse joy. In the darkness, her bandmates couldn’t observe her. Couldn’t judge her. Might even forget she was there. She wished she could forget herself as well. Instead, she stared at nothing yet saw Penstemon and Bitterroot gazing at her with anger in their eyes. They would never forgive her. Never. The grulla felt no resentment—she didn’t deserve compassion.
The following evening, after the mustangs’ shock had ebbed to the duller but more abiding pain of grief, Spurge led Talus to the far end of the meadow. For a moment both horses studied their surroundings. Mount Mesteño pulsed with a spare, pre-spring beauty. Russet buds, their fleshy scales hushed with potential, knobbed the twigs of the aspens. They would not unfurl into leaves for a few more weeks. Meanwhile the grass shimmered with the teal flush that precedes rapid growth and the creek lapped against larval beds. Even the air—mellow though still cold—seemed in a state of transition. Talus noticed all this with pain. She had yet to forgive the land for ignoring her sorrow.

Spurge spoke first: “Why did you do it? Why did you leave the grove when I told you to stay where you were?”

“I don’t know. I thought I could get to the junipers in time. I thought we’d be safe there,” Talus said.

“But why did you think that? No one has ever outrun a silver bird.”

“No one had ever knocked down a pen, either. Mother, I’m not ordinary. I never have been.”

“You’re a filly. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Talus’s temper overpowered her sadness. She lashed her tail and pawed the ground.

“Nothing more? Nothing more? I’m the fastest, strongest foal on the mountain!”

“There it is. The attitude that cost Penstemon her life and Bitterroot his freedom. Do you have any idea what you’ve done? Look at your bandmates. Look at them!”
Talus pinned her ears—she was well aware of the consequences of her actions—but obeyed. Her family members wandered the meadow in varying degrees of grief. Larkspur watched over his mates with a possessiveness born of loss. Milfoil continued to groom Draba long after her coat was clean; apparently touch alone could convince the mare her daughter had survived the roundup. Currant and Vetch walked in despondent circles. Not a single mustang had come home whole. Had not been stripped of something essential.

“I’m sorry,” Talus said. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“I’m not saying you did. But it happened, Talus. It happened. There’s no way around that,” Spurge said.

The grulla lowered her head in shame. She saw Penstemon struggle. She saw Bitterroot plant his feet. “What should I do? How can I make it up to Currant and Vetch? To everybody?”

“You can’t. You can only learn to be a better horse.”

“How?”

S purge gazed at the summit of Mount Mesteño. Talus observed her dam carefully. What was so interesting about that wind-scoured peak? Only the bighorn sheep revered it, setting their pleated hooves on its crags as lightly as possible.

“Do you remember why I named you Talus?” the black mare asked.

“You hoped I would be tough like the rocks up there,” the filly answered.

“Good. What makes them tough?”

Talus hesitated. The question was too easy. “They’re hard. Sturdy. They never give in. Never weaken.”
“No. They’re tough because they support each other, because they would rather be part of an entire slope than single stones, however beautiful. That’s the attitude you need to adopt to become a better horse. Do you understand?”

Talus stared at her mother. The light had taken on the runny quality that heralds sunset. It silvered the hair inside Spurge’s ears. Finally the grulla nodded and said, “Yes, I understand.”

She was telling the truth. But comprehension wouldn’t change her way of thinking. Hopelessness flushed the strength from her body. If only she could start life over again as a different mustang…That would be easier than altering the traits she had accumulated since her foalhood.

“Do you hate me?” Talus asked.

“I could never hate you,” Spurge said. “Why—”

“You told Milfoil you were disappointed in me. Don’t deny it. I was right behind you.”

“Talus, I was upset. I say things I don’t mean when I’m upset. Everyone does. You know that.”

“Mother, don’t lie to me. Please don’t lie to me.”

Spurge inhaled, then released her breath in a long gust. “Fine. I was disappointed. I am disappointed. After you destroyed the pen, I thought you had developed the selflessness of a lead mare at last. The roundup showed me you haven’t gotten there yet.”

“But you believe I will someday, don’t you?”

“I’m not sure. I’m honestly not sure.”

A terrible distance sprang up between Spurge and Talus. The grulla sensed their relationship would never be the same. Her dam had raised her with the assumption greatness lay
ahead. That assumption had sustained her. Bolstered her. Washed her in the cool stream of motherly love. Now she had nothing. Was nothing. Talus turned and galloped off.

“Wait!” Spurge cried.

The filly kept running. She didn’t stop until she reached a secluded spot near the edge of the meadow. There she watched the sky redden to the shade of amaranth blossoms. As the day drew to a close in a barrage of color, a light breeze formed. It carried the voices of Currant, Milfoil, Draba, and Vetch to Talus. Her ears pricked involuntarily.

“Do you think Spurge was hard on Talus?” Currant asked. The roan sounded concerned in spite of Penstemon’s death.

Milfoil answered, “She must have been. Harder than usual, anyway.”

“It’s about time,” Vetch said bitterly. “If Spurge disciplined her daughter regularly, the humans might not have caught us.”

“They would have caught us. They always catch us. If Talus hadn’t bolted, another horse would have,” Currant disagreed.

The grulla waited for Milfoil or Draba to reveal she had left the grove out of arrogance rather than fright. Neither exposed her. Draba even insisted she was about to flee when her sister did. The dunalino’s loyalty astounded Talus. If her breathing had been compromised, she wouldn’t have forgiven the mustang responsible. Who, then, was the stronger filly?

Vetch snapped, “You’re fooling yourselves. Talus is trouble. Quit making excuses for her just because she’s Spurge’s foal.”

Silence followed the brown mare’s pronouncement. It was time to sleep. Talus longed to bed down with Spurge, Milfoil, and Draba as usual. But after the events of the evening, she couldn’t bear to interact with her bandmates. Every wave of heat emanating from their coats
would remind her of how much she had hurt them. In the end, she simply spent the night alone. Whenever an owl laughed or a bat chirped, she flinched as if she were being scolded. Whenever the musk of a passing animal widened her nostrils, she combed the darkness, hoping to see Penstemon or Bitterroot. It appeared she would never again experience complete rest. Her mind had become a pen, her thoughts fear-maddened horses. They bucked, kicked, pawed, reared, and wheeled. They screamed for release. There was nothing she could do for them. For them, or for herself.
BOOK II
CHAPTER 19

Spring arrived a few weeks later. Wildflowers stunned the thin soil high on Mount Mesteño with their lambent petals. In the groves farther down, the aspens’ firm brown buds greened and expanded into spade-shaped leaves. Even the always vibrant junipers and sagebrush doubled in beauty, their foliage taking on a special sheen. Occasionally so many birds sang at once the air seemed to be made of music. Yet the new season did not lessen the horses’ pain. Her distress intensified by Spurge’s loss of faith, Talus hated the change that had settled on the land most of all. Every intoxicating sight, sound, or smell reminded her of Penstemon and Bitterroot. Of how much they had lost.

Talus missed the dun colt more than the old chestnut. She thought about him constantly. Where was he? What was he doing? Did he know she would have apologized for her callousness after the fight with Lupine if she had only had the chance? The questions grew larger the longer they went unanswered. Still, they didn’t sting as much as what might have been. Spurge’s, Milfoil’s, and Currant’s bellies had begun to sag with life. The coming foals cheered Talus to an extent—Currant needed someone to love to recover from the death of Penstemon—but they also made her acutely aware of the fact that Bitterroot would never populate Mount Mesteño with his own sons and daughters. Would never know the joy of recognizing his conformation or his gait or his fleet ear movements in his offspring. At least not wild offspring. Perhaps the humans would let him breed. That wasn’t much consolation. A captive mustang could not give his colts and fillies anything except pain. Except a legacy better off un-bequeathed.

The prospect of new family members had a similar effect on Vetch. Though initially she seemed to be doing as well as could be expected, she fell into a deep depression, refusing to
speak or even communicate with body language. Larkspur had to bite her often to keep her from losing contact with the group. Her behavior altered the social structure of the band. Milfoil became second-in-command, a role that did not suit the reliable yet unassuming dunalino. Draba also showed signs of discomfort. Her dam’s promotion increased her status by association, forcing her to assert herself for the first time. Whenever the horses visited a waterhole or a mineral lick, confusion set in thanks to Draba’s reluctance to claim her turn ahead of Vetch and Currant. Everyone was relieved when the brown mare emerged from her sorrow as assertive as usual. But her aggression had gone from a means of establishing rank to an expression of hatred.

Talus bore the brunt of the hostility. If she passed within nipping range, Vetch set upon her, tearing holes in her coat before the others could break up the fight. Normally the grulla did not defend herself. She had caused Bitterroot’s capture and ought to face the consequences.

Everything changed on a trip to the valley where Talus had been introduced to her bandmates almost a year earlier. The bunchgrass smelled so sweet laced with dew that the filly couldn’t wait to graze. She launched into a gallop just as Vetch shied at a rabbit. The horses collided. Talus shook herself, tested the leg most jarred by the impact, and trotted forward. Suddenly hooves pounded her flanks. She turned to see Vetch advancing with her head lowered. Rage shortened Talus’s breath. A bite to the hindquarters was one thing. Stallion-like kicks were quite another.

“Watch yourself, you clumsy fool,” the brown mare said.

“No, you watch yourself,” Talus said. “What are you trying to prove by attacking me like a male?”

“What do you think?”

“Look, I’m sorry about Bitterroot—”
Vetch charged at the mention of her son. Talus squared her shoulders to absorb the blow, but she was no match for a full-grown mustang. The grulla tumbled onto her side. She scrambled upright only to be knocked to the ground once again. Vetch, Talus realized with a matter-of-fact horror, intended to kill her. Was this justice? Or the ultimate perversion of herd life? The grulla closed her eyes, waiting for the end. A second later, she heard a squeal of anger and glanced up to find Spurge standing above her.

"Leave my daughter alone," the black mare said.

"Your daughter is a liability," Vetch spat.

"No, you are. You’ve lost your mind. Back down, Vetch. Back down for your own good."

"Why should I? You can’t beat me. You’ve never been able to beat me. I don’t understand why our bandmates have followed you all these years."

"There’s more to leadership than strength."

Vetch snorted, tossed her forelock, and presented her hindquarters to Spurge. Talus regained her feet. She studied her mother with a mixture of curiosity and fear. The grulla had not seen a rump-to-rump battle between mares before—females usually sorted out their differences with an exchange of breath—but this was not a fair contest. Heavy with foal, Spurge couldn’t pose a threat to Vetch. It would be unwise even to try. Yet the black mustang did not walk away. Fury hardened her gaze.

"Spurge, what are you doing? You can’t compete with her. Not in your condition. Don’t put your dominance at risk," Milfoil said.

"If I lose, so be it," Spurge said.
The lead mare offered her hindquarters to Vetch. Both horses ascertained the other’s position, gathered themselves, and kicked backward with tremendous force. Unable to lift her legs at a steep angle with her stomach distended, Spurge only caught Vetch on the gaskins. However, the brown mare landed a solid hit on either side of her opponent’s tail root. Talus watched in dismay as her dam dropped to her knees. Beyond the combatants, Milfoil, Draba, and Currant scored the earth with their hooves. Larkspur did not react, but his pricked ears indicated a deep investment in the outcome of the brawl.

Spurge rose unsteadily. Vetch lashed out again. This time she broke skin. The thick, warm smell of blood narrowed Talus’s nostrils and sealed off her throat. She couldn’t believe her mother’s reign was drawing to a close. That she had brought about the beautiful black’s downfall.

Spurge sank to the ground. She tried to rise, reaching and pushing like a foal attempting to stand. It was no use. Vetch’s last kick had knocked the strength from the black mare. Talus nickered to her mother anyway. Encouragement without hope was better than no encouragement at all. Milfoil, Draba, and Currant also whinnied. Spurge flicked her ears. She had heard her bandmates. Wanted to press on for them, but couldn’t.

Vetch prepared to strike once more. Her muscles bunched until they lifted her vein-ribboned skin. Talus stopped breathing. Despair had contracted her lungs. Spurge would never again run at the head of the group, her sleek black form a vanguard made of the night. A dark promise of well-being.

Larkspur charged Vetch. He rammed her so hard she toppled onto her side. The mustangs were too stunned to make a sound. They couldn’t even gasp. For an instant only the noise of the wind plunging from the juniper belt into the deep bowl of the valley reached them.
Vetch climbed to her feet and faced Larkspur. “Why did you do that? You’re not supposed to interfere with fights for dominance.”

Talus studied her father. How would he respond? Vetch was right. He had broken an important rule: let battles play out so the most deserving horses lead their families. The long-term health of the species depended on it.

Larkspur said, “Stallions have the right to intervene if a band member goes rogue. You stepped out of line the second you attacked Talus.”

“Talus,” Vetch repeated the filly’s name, her voice as low as the rumblings of Mount Mesteño, “Talus. The cause of our suffering. I wish I had grabbed her by the withers and shaken the life from her when she was a baby. Doesn’t anyone else see how dangerous she is? Or are you blinded by your devotion to Spurge? Come on, answer me.”

The mustangs stared at Talus. She looked away in shame. Her bandmates might have changed their minds about her since the evening after the roundup. After all, the absence of Penstemon and Bitterroot had only grown more apparent as time passed. The pair seemed to haunt the mountain now. They surfaced in the purling of creeks, in blades of grass whitened by sunlight, in fresh, acidic pollen that would sweeten with age. In every small beauty they could not experience.

Yet no one stepped forward to agree with Vetch. Milfoil, Draba, and Currant turned to Larkspur, giving him permission to speak on their behalf. Hope spread its wings in Talus’s chest.

At length Larkspur said, “Talus made a mistake. A costly, costly mistake. But to wish her dead for it…that is not our way. Besides, the humans might have captured us, anyway.”

“I doubt it,” Vetch said.

“Then you’re not being sensible.”
“You’re not being sensible. Talus is a menace. I won’t remain in the same band as her for another day.”

“Fine. Leave my territory.”

Vetch threw up her tail in shock. Apparently it hadn’t occurred to her that Larkspur would choose a daughter nearing estrus over an old companion. She turned toward her fellow mares as if expecting them to protest the stallion’s decision. None of the horses spoke. The smell of regret flowed from the big brown mustang’s coat.

“Larkspur,” she said, “Larkspur, you can’t be serious.”

“I am,” the dun said, though Talus detected sorrow radiating from his body, too.

“Have you forgotten how happy you were when you won me?”

“No. How could I? But you have to go.”

Vetch glared at Talus, wheeled around, and cantered east. The grulla shuddered. Bitterroot’s dam was not through with her. They would meet again to settle the score. And when they did, Spurge and Larkspur wouldn’t be there.

“I’m sore already,” Spurge said, tottering upright. “Vetch sure can kick.”

“Are you okay?” Milfoil asked.

“Well, nothing’s broken.”

“I’ll clean your wounds.”

“Wait. I need Talus.”

The filly trotted to the black mare. They rubbed their faces together affectionately. Talus closed her eyes and inhaled Spurge’s scent. It was just like her own grassy yet distinctly animal odor. Olfactory evidence that they were related. Connected. One organism doubled so it would not be lonely. The tension between them fell away. Talus realized disappointment did not
preclude love. Someday she would prove she still had the makings of a leader. But until then, it was okay if her mother doubted her. It was okay.

“Oh, Talus, I thought I’d lost you,” Spurge said after the two drew apart. The stench of fear followed her like a swarm of flies.

“You didn’t,” Talus said. “You didn’t.” Her heart expanded with tenderness.

Larkspur approached. He said to Spurge, “I’m glad you and Talus aren’t hurt badly. Let’s stay in the valley for a few hours. There’s plenty of food here.”

Encouraged by her bandmates’ loyalty, Talus mingled with the group for the first time since the roundup. Yet Larkspur’s melancholy diminished her relief. The dun stood by himself while the rest of the mustangs went about their business. It was obvious he pined for Vetch.

Talus watched him carefully. As she did, her imagination took over. Years dropped from her sire. He was not much older than Fireweed. A stripling compared to the stallion he would become. But he lifted his head proudly—he had recently claimed his first mare. She was a slow, brown, thick-bodied creature. Not beautiful like Finch’s swift black co-leader. Still, he wouldn’t trade her for the prettiest horse on Mount Mesteño. And not just as a matter of principle. She had the staunch, resolute disposition upon which great bands were formed. With a mustang like that at his side, there was nothing he couldn’t accomplish. No burden he couldn’t heft.
When the lupine and paintbrush swelled into thick spears of color as their buds opened, Talus turned one. She no longer resembled the tiny foal with outsized legs Spurge had pushed into the world a year earlier. Her mane, once an upright fringe, had transformed into black silk. So had her fuzzy paddle of a tail. Even her conformation was different. Though the grulla had always been well-balanced, age had increased her symmetry, padding out her frame so she lost the squeezed appearance of most young horses. In fact, only her light hips distinguished her from the adults.

Yet Talus’s mentality had changed more than anything. The knowledge that Spurge still loved her allowed her to live with guilt, but she had not recovered her self-esteem. While the filly still acted like a dominant mustang, pinning her ears or lifting a hoof whenever a low-ranking band member tried to pass her, she considered herself the weak link in her family. Nobody else was responsible for the loss of two loved ones. If she forgot that, all she had to do to rekindle her shame was inspect the scar on her shoulder. The scar from her mother’s teeth. Talus knew Spurge hadn’t meant to harm her, had simply wanted to herd her back to the aspen grove before the bird descended, but she chose to interpret the welt of flesh as the physical expression of her inadequacy. Somehow this comforted her. Cleansed her. Brought her a little closer to atonement. Of course, she could never truly be absolved. Not unless she discovered a way to exchange her life for Penstemon’s, her freedom for Bitterroot’s.

In spite of her remorse—and to her great surprise—Talus remained capable of joy. She found herself looking forward to the new foals; as their debuts neared, they had become too real, too much their own beings, to remind her of Bitterroot. The entire band shared her excitement.
Larkspur watched over his mates with the most extreme vigilance he had ever displayed. When a juvenile mountain lion too small to threaten a mustang approached the group, he attacked, pummeling the tawny beast with his hooves until it managed to roll clear and flee. Draba prodded her dam’s barrel with her nose on a daily basis, working her ears with pleasure every time her future brother or sister squirmed in response. The mares themselves seemed in high spirits in spite of their anxiety. They often dipped their heads to inspect their rounded stomachs as if impatient to meet the foals within.

One day Currant was nowhere to be found, but none of the adults went to search for her. She returned with a bay roan colt. The following afternoon, Milfoil disappeared. She, too, rejoined the band accompanied by a foal: an apricot dun filly.

Spurge vanished the next morning. Talus woke, sniffed the spot where her mother had spent the night, and trotted across the meadow. Draba shrugged off Currant’s son—he was nibbling her forelock—and ran after her sister.

“Talus,” she called, “Talus, don’t look for Spurge.”

The grulla paused to let the other mustang catch up. “Why not? I want to make sure she’s okay.”

“My dam says mares have to foal alone. I tried to go with her when she left to deliver her filly and she bit me. Come on. I found a patch of clover near the creek.”

Talus followed Draba reluctantly. The yearlings browsed side by side, upending the clover with their hooves and eating it root tip to blossom. The orb-shaped flowers tasted waxy yet sweet. Under different circumstances, Talus would have grown weak with happiness, overcome by the fact that her friendship with Draba had survived the roundup. But Spurge’s
absence dominated her thoughts. She remembered Aster’s words: “The colt I dropped in the spring... he wasn’t equipped for life.”

Draba stopped feeding and said, “Spurge and her baby will be fine. You’ll see.”

“I know,” Talus lied. “I’m not nervous in the slightest.”

“I can smell your concern. You don’t have to pretend with me.”

The grulla examined her sibling. Draba had increased in size, beauty, and wisdom. Talus marveled at the change.

“Draba, you’re beautiful!” she exclaimed.

“So are you,” the dunalino said. “We’re not small anymore.”

Talus stared at Currant’s mischievous son. He was mouthing Larkspur’s ears with an expression of bliss on his youth-softened face. She wondered how long that bliss would last and what catastrophe would bring it to an end, forever dividing the little one’s experiences into “before” and “after.”

“It’s difficult to believe we were ever small,” the grulla said bitterly.

Draba was about to reply when Milfoil nickered. Spurge had returned with a filly as dark as loam. Immediately the horses converged on the black mare to introduce themselves to the most recent addition to their band. Even Larkspur appeared delighted, briefly shedding his dignity to prance and kick the air. Talus couldn’t recall the last time he had acted like a foal. His joy was recovery. Relief. Something good had happened. Something good.

Talus lingered at the rear of the welcoming party. She felt uncharacteristically shy. But when Currant’s colt greeted the loam-colored filly with too much exuberance, making her duck behind her mother, the grulla chased him away. Nobody would frighten her first full sister while
she was around. Though she had yet to touch noses with the youngster, she already sensed a powerful bond forming.

"Talus," Spurge said, "this is Woodrush. You'll teach her all about being a mustang, won't you?"

The name fit. In the sun, the filly’s hide lightened to the glossy brown of woodrush petals. Talus flared her nostrils. Larkspur’s brushy musk and Spurge’s grass-like perfume emanated from their newborn. Still, the wobble-legged creature was unique: the cleanliness of snow-fed tarns also haunted her coat.

Talus said, "Of course! When do we start? I’ll show her how to gallop into the wind without hurting her eyes and how to switch flies from her hindquarters and how—"

"Hang on. She needs to learn to walk steadily before anything else," Milfoil laughed. Her own foal staggered as if to prove the point.

"Did you have any complications, Spurge?" Currant asked, allowing her son to chew her tail.

"No, but I’m very tired. Would you mind if we talked later? I need a long nap," the black mare said.

Larkspur drove off the others with thrusts of his head. "You heard her. Move along now."

S purge said, "Wait. Talus can stay."

The grulla glanced at Draba—the dunalino regarded her warmly for a moment, then joined Milfoil—and approached her dam. Spurge quivered with fatigue.

"Congratulations," Talus said. She reflected on the jealousy Bistort used to arouse in her and vowed never to harbor antipathy for Woodrush…if that were possible given the filly’s extreme vulnerability.
“Thank you,” Spurge said. “I meant what I told you earlier, you know. About helping me raise your sister. She’s weaker than I would like. You’d be a strong role model from a physical perspective.”

Talus registered Spurge’s qualification yet did not protest. She recognized she had to live up to her name before she deserved to be emulated in all respects. Besides, she was more concerned by her mother’s opinion of Woodrush. Now that her attention had been drawn to the foal’s frailty, the grulla saw plainly that her sibling lacked size and strength compared to the other young ones. Maybe the grueling run to the pen had dwarfed her. Unlike Milfoil and Currant, Spurge had been forced to gallop at the front for the entire trip down Mount Mesteño. It made sense that the black mare’s daughter was the scrawniest of the roundup babies. Talus trembled. Her mistake no longer affected just the mustangs present at the time. Spurge had taken it into her body and passed it on to Woodrush.

“I’ll do everything I can for her. I’ll watch over her every day of my life if need be,” Talus said fiercely.

“Well, you can’t do that. You’re nearly ready to find your own band,” Spurge said. Her voice sounded sad. Like dead leaves curling in on themselves.

Talus glanced at her dam, then gazed at Woodrush instead. The filly was sound asleep in the bunchgrass. Her delicate, almost skeletal barrel rounded and flattened with each breath. The grulla had not rested on the ground for many months. Only the very small, ignorant of danger, of the need to remain standing even in repose, risked such surrender. But they could afford to. They still ate, drank, and played in the shadows of their parents. Chaperoned. Protected. Safeguarded.
CHAPTER 21

The three foals soon developed distinct personalities that further endeared them to their bandmates. Currant’s bay roan colt—named Yarrow after Penstemon’s son—abounded with energy. He spent most of his time yanking tails, running in circles, and flushing birds. Yet his antics rarely annoyed the adults. With his bold expression, umber head, and white-ticked body, he was too charming to resent. Currant joked that Larkspur would have ousted Yarrow from the family if the little mustang weren’t so good-looking.

Milfoil’s apricot dun filly, a graceful youngster called Gentian, resembled her dam and Draba except her mane was a ruddy hue. However, her temperament could not have been more different. When the dunalinos flinched at a rustle in the sagebrush, she trotted forward to investigate. When they paused before venturing into the open, she snorted impatiently and tried to push past them. In short, Gentian was fearless—and eager to obtain as many new experiences as possible.

Woodrush was the thinker. While Yarrow and Gentian raced each other or practiced leaping over shrubs, the loam-colored filly wandered off by herself. Sometimes she listened to the wind for hours, her ears rotating, halting, and rotating again. She seemed aware of her physical limitations. Determined to compensate for them by honing her senses. The horses loved Woodrush for her resolve—and for the appealing sadness that descended upon her in the evenings.

Talus loved to play with the foals, but her joy was tinged with anxiety. She sensed she would have to leave the band soon. When she did, she would be more vulnerable than she had ever been—it might take many days to find a new stallion protector. The prospect of facing the
dangers of Mount Mesteño alone terrified her. Even the most tranquil meadow might thrum with peril once there was no Larkspur to alert her to threats, no Spurge to lead her to safety.

But the thought of severing ties with the mustangs she had known since her birth disturbed Talus most of all. She was so used to her bandmates that she rarely noticed the way shade grayed Milfoil’s blonde coat or Currant’s eyes brightened at the sound of birdsong or Larkspur’s ears pricked in his sleep. If those details vanished over time, much as beloved places are remembered in generic terms, in sweeps of color…

At least Talus would never forget Spurge. The grulla expected to be able to summon images of her dam well into old age. Death itself would come to her in the form of a black mare who smelled like new bunchgrass. Then mother and daughter would run together until the earth dimmed and disappeared. Until only the wind recalled them, not as whole creatures, but as forelocks responding to its cold touch.

Toward the end of spring, on a morning with the fullness of summer, Talus and Draba watched over the foals while the adults relaxed in the aspen groves. Gentian, Woodrush, and Yarrow were jumping the creek in the middle of the meadow. Like their older siblings, the youngsters had gained agility and communication skills at an accelerated rate. This made them more entertaining—and harder to supervise.

Gentian cleared the creek easily and turned to see if her siblings could do the same. Yarrow gathered himself, charged forward, and leaped into the air. He landed on the opposite bank but lost his footing, staggering backward into the water. The handsome colt climbed out drenched, his dark skin visible beneath his thin coat.

“Don’t come down so hard and the ground won’t break under your hooves,” Gentian said with a wise look.
“I can’t help it,” Yarrow said. “I’m a colt. I’m heavier than you.”

The apricot dun snorted derisively at her brother’s excuses and called to Woodrush,
“What’s taking you so long?”

Talus glanced at the littlest foal. Woodrush seemed uncertain; one of her ears flicked upright while the other swiveled to the side. She had grown since Spurge introduced her to the band, but she still lagged behind Gentian and Yarrow from a developmental standpoint. The grulla approached to tell the diminutive mustang she didn’t have to hurdle the creek if she didn’t feel equal to the task. Woodrush must have guessed her intent because the loam-brown filly switched her tail as if to say, “I can handle this.” Talus retreated. She hated that her sister had inherited the family stubborn streak. Obstinacy in the weak could only cause pain.

Draba said, “It’s all right. She can’t hurt herself. If she gets wet, she gets wet.”

“I just don’t want her to be humiliated,” Talus said.

“It’s not that bad, you know.”

“What isn’t?”

“Being the small one. I’m content with my lot in life and Woodrush will be, too.”

Talus cranked up her head in surprise. She knew strength had its detriments—she wouldn’t have tried to outrun the silver bird if she were not physically gifted—but the idea that a horse could be happy in spite of low rank bewildered her. Once again, it occurred to her that Draba might be the better mustang, the one who did not possess a special talent but persevered anyway. Unless kindness was a talent as legitimate as power or speed or courage...

A splash diverted Talus’s attention. Woodrush had attempted the jump only to fall into the creek. She regained her feet, joined the other foals on the bank, and rolled herself dry on the springy bunchgrass. When she rose a few minutes later, she appeared embarrassed yet none the
worse for the wear. Talus still felt a pang. Even if athleticism was not the ultimate virtue, wild animals needed it to survive. Woodrush had started life at a disadvantage, had been robbed of her own potential before her first breath. Had been blessed with the blood of Spurge but not a body fit enough to put it to use. The grulla wished she could give the youngster her swiftness and stamina. It was only fair since her mistake had enfeebled the filly. For a moment Talus imagined her energy shooting from her like lightning from a thunderhead. She saw it strike Woodrush, enter her, and remake her into a horse with kinetic strides and firm muscles. Into the horse she would have been granted a different older sister.

Draba interrupted Talus’s reverie. “Look at those three,” she said, laughing. “They could be us as foals.”

Talus gazed at Gentian, Yarrow, and Woodrush, who were chasing each other in circles. She knew what the dunalino meant. The apricot dun and the bay roan, confident, exuberant, and agile, called to mind the grulla as a newborn. Woodrush—delicate yet determined to keep up—was reminiscent of Draba. “Yes, they could be,” Talus agreed. “I hope they stay carefree longer than we did, though.”

“They should. The next roundup won’t be for two more years if the humans hold true to form. If Gentian and the rest don’t run off to Willow Creek like us, they might not even encounter a human before then.”

“Willow Creek. The worst experience of my life…except for the roundup. Everything seems small compared to the roundup.”

“We should go back. Willow Creek won’t be dangerous for another week or so; the humans don’t drive their cattle up the mountain to graze until summer.”
Talus gawked at Draba. “Why in the world would you want to visit such an awful place again? The smell will be there even if the cows aren’t.”

The dunalino hesitated. Spurge, Milfoil, and Currant emerged from the aspens and the foals galloped to them to nurse. The little ones whisked their tails with pleasure as they fed.

Draba said, “I’m not sure, Talus. I guess I want to see every part of our band’s range—the good and the bad—before we have to leave.”

“Well, at least it increased mine.”

Talus examined Draba. Since the roundup, the dunalino had shown remarkable forgiveness, maturity, and acceptance of her station in life. Now it seemed she had an adventurous streak, too. Had the flaxen-maned filly been altered by the events of the winter or had she always been this complex? The grulla felt she was only beginning to get to know her sister, to love her for the qualities that made her a good companion rather than the mere existence of companionship.

At last Talus said, “All right. I’ll go to Willow Creek with you. But I don’t think our mothers will be pleased if we stray from the band.”

“They won’t even notice. It’s natural for yearlings to wander at this time of year,” Draba said.

It was true. The urge to roam often seized young mustangs at the end of spring—the impulse readied them for their summer departures from their home ranges. Less than a week
earlier, Talus had spotted Bistort’s bay daughter grazing far from the protection of her smoky black father.

“I suppose you’re right. Still, I’d prefer to leave when we won’t be missed—my dam asked me to teach Woodrush how to find the freshest clover today.”

“That’s fine. We can steal off while the others take their evening nap.”

The following hours passed quickly. Talus helped Spurge with Woodrush’s education until the sky turned the pale orange of leadplant pollen. One by one the horses retreated to their favorite resting sites and fell asleep. Even perennially alert Larkspur nodded off. Careful not to disturb their bandmates, the grulla and the dunalino trotted downhill through the aspens. They didn’t break into a swifter yet noisier gait for a quarter mile. As Talus accelerated, a mixture of dread, excitement, and melancholy bloomed in her chest. It opened petal by petal, filling her head with images of humans and cattle, of Finch and Bitterroot, of herself as a foal about to destroy her own innocence.
Talus guided Draba southeast. (Though the dunalino was the one who actually wanted to visit Willow Creek, the grulla had to stay in front in case of danger.) The land changed as the horses descended. Gradually the distance between the aspens increased and the trees themselves grew smaller. Even the forest floor took on a different character; thin, rocky soil gave way to mineral-blackened loam. The fillies had encountered the same habitat alterations during their first trip to the cows’ feeding grounds almost a year earlier. For a few seconds Talus thought she had plunged through time and become her younger self. Then a light wind ran the length of her adult-sized body, reminding her of how much and how irrevocably she had aged.

Just as the sun completed its westward journey, towing all color from the mountain, Talus smelled the fatty odor of cattle. She paused and dilated her nostrils. Draba copied her. The bloody musk of humans coursed beneath the stench of their changes like an undercurrent in a stream. Unpleasant, but too faint to terrify.

“See? I told you Willow Creek has been deserted since winter,” Draba said cheerfully.

Talus snorted. “I never disputed that point. Even so, we ought to be cautious.”

“You’re telling me to be cautious? What’s gotten into you? Not long ago you would have led me here at a gallop.”

“Oh, stop making fun of me, Draba. I don’t find anything about this situation amusing.”

“I’m sorry. I was just trying to ease your tension a little—Willow Creek affected you more than me when we were small.”

Talus felt ashamed for mistaking Draba’s kindness for flippancy, but couldn’t bring herself to apologize. Not when the dunalino had reminded her of the bout of depression she had
suffered after her initial encounter with a human. The bout of depression Penstemon had banished with the story of Yarrow’s death and Currant’s adoption. Sometimes, in the dream-muddled instants before waking, the grulla imagined the old chestnut was near, could almost detect the mulch-like pungency that hovered about elderly mustangs.

The yearlings pressed on in awkward silence. Several minutes later, they reached a gap in the aspens and peered through it. A familiar open space sprawled beyond the trees. Talus trotted forward with Draba behind her. Their footfalls disturbed a male towhee raking through leaf litter with backward thrusts of his legs. He screamed his peculiar, feline scream and flew off in search of a quieter foraging location.

Talus listened to the towhee’s wingbeats fade, then focused on her surroundings. Willow Creek seemed diminished, abbreviated by the encroaching darkness. Yet it was every bit as horrible as she recalled. The banks bordering the ribbon of water that gave the clearing its name lay in shambles though no cows had trampled them for months. After years of abuse, they simply lacked the raw material to aspire to more than a hoof-sucking sludge. Not one sapling rose from that dirty gruel—or ever would again. Worse, the bunchgrass thinned and vanished altogether as it approached the area where the cattle liked to congregate. It was as if some terrible star had dropped from the sky and burned the life out of the earth. Talus quivered with rage at this crime against nature.

But the mistreatment of horses filled her with a pain so sharp she couldn’t believe it hadn’t torn her open. Despite the dim light, she recognized the place where Finch had halted to study her, had shrugged off his servitude-induced lethargy to call for his black mare. And if she had galloped northwest, instinct would have carried her to the glade where Bitterroot had said, his stiff foal’s mane bristling, “I would rather die than bear a human.” The thought of her brother
stripped of his volition, of his right to pick his own course through a maze of sagebrush or drift across an alpine meadow like a living cloud, clawed at Talus’s insides.

The grulla rounded on Draba with renewed irritation. “Let’s go home. This was a stupid idea. How could you think coming here would help us put the past behind us?”

“Talus,” the dunalino said with uncharacteristic anger, “we didn’t return to Willow Creek to forget. We returned to remember.”

“What’s the point of remembering? Haven’t we suffered enough already?”

“We won’t heal unless we confront what happened to Penstemon and Bitterroot. What happened in this very place, when we realized there was danger in the world. Well, I might heal without that. But you won’t. I know you, Talus. I know you better than you know me. And I’m certain that if you don’t allow yourself to experience grief now, you’ll regret it later.”

“Allow myself to experience grief? I grieve every hour, every minute—”

“You grieve with self-reproach. With guilt. Why don’t you just grieve? Reflect on your bandmates, not your role in their misfortune?”

“I have to live with my error, Draba.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to relive it.”

Draba fell silent, inviting Talus to embrace her sorrow. The grulla resisted. It struck her as strange to mourn Penstemon and Bitterroot without condemning herself for bolting from the aspens. Yet as night enfolded Mount Mesteño in its purple wings, obliterating Willow Creek except for a few swathes of moon-dazzled grass, she felt what her sister wanted her to feel: a sadness complete in itself. A sadness free of blame and therefore a response to lost loved ones rather than the circumstances under which they were lost.
Talus realized the greatest tragedy was not that she had caused Penstemon’s death and Bitterroot’s enslavement. It was that Penstemon was dead and Bitterroot enslaved. Her culpability could not be dismissed, but if she let it rule her, if she fixated on atonement instead of the flesh-and-blood cost of the roundup, she would continue to walk the same selfish path she had walked since her youth.

Oddly, there was pleasure in such unadulterated misery. The immediacy of Talus’s distress conjured vibrant images of Penstemon and Bitterroot. They might have stood only a meter away, entire, vital, beautiful, close enough for the filly to watch their muscles shiver. Close enough to nuzzle. Their vividness flushed buried memories. Some hurt. Penstemon’s leg bent at an unnatural angle. Bitterroot whinnied for Vetch as the humans spirited him away from the mountain. But others delighted Talus. Her family pranced through a field of wildflowers, a colorful rabble of butterflies preceding them. Larkspur taught the foals how to scratch their itches with forward movements of their back legs while the mares looked on in amusement. Penstemon and Bitterroot were present in each of these recollections. Present, and, more importantly, happy. Talus decided she preferred heartbreak to suppression.

“You’re right, Draba,” Talus said, her voice equally strangled by grief and joy, “Penstemon and Bitterroot live in our pain. We have to feel it to stay close to them. To stay close to them and to better ourselves.”

“Exactly. Wouldn’t you rather suffer than forget our friends?” the dunalino asked.

Talus didn’t reply. Draba knew the answer. The fillies spent the next hour standing shoulder to shoulder, an easy silence between them. Overhead, nighthawks, the first to return to Mount Mesteño to breed, toured the sky in nimble loops. Their petulant cries made Talus flirt her ears and switch her tail. She had not heard that irritating yet heart-pinching sound since she was a
few months old. It would have filled her with melancholy earlier in the evening. Would have reminded her that she had to leave Spurge soon. Now it took its proper place as a noise like any other, became just one more note in the mountain’s endless song. Apparently mourning Penstemon and Bitterroot had not only given the grulla access to happy memories, but also had allowed her to accept her own maturity.

“We should start back if we want to reach the meadow before morning,” Draba said.

Talus agreed. “Yes—it’s so dark the trip home will be slow going.”

The mustangs traveled uphill at a cautious pace. As they climbed Mount Mesteño, their hooves recognizing trails their eyes could not detect, Talus contemplated Draba’s pronouncement: “I know you better than you know me.” The grulla hoped that someday she would understand her sister as deeply as her sister understood her. Then she could help if the dunalino ever needed emotional support herself.

When the yearlings rejoined the band, they found their mothers waiting for them in the moonlight. Woodrush and Gentian dozed nearby. Milfoil trotted to them at once, her steps buoyant with relief. Spurge followed more slowly. Talus couldn’t read her expression.

“Oh, Draba, I thought you had left to find a new family without saying goodbye,” Milfoil said.

“I would never do that,” Draba protested.

“I was right,” Spurge said to Milfoil. “These two wouldn’t run off by choice. Their father will have to drive them away in the end. Besides, they’re not in heat yet.”

Talus pricked her ears. She knew that “in heat” referred to the condition that would sever her ties with Larkspur, and, by extension, his mates, but she had no idea what else lay in store for her. Perhaps Spurge could solve the mystery.
The grulla said, “Tell me—”

“Have you been to Willow Creek?” Spurge demanded, sniffing her daughter. “You reek of cattle.”

“I convinced Talus to go with me,” Draba interjected. The dunalino tried in vain to evade her own dam’s questing nose.

Spurge and Milfoil exchanged glances. However, they remained silent. The mares either sensed that their fillies had a legitimate reason for exploring Willow Creek or accepted that it was not their job to discipline near-adult mustangs.

“Well,” Spurge said at length, “you’d better wallow in the creek. I don’t want the foals to smell cows on you and ask for an explanation. They’re not ready to learn about humans yet.”

Talus gazed at Woodrush and Gentian sleeping in a tangle of fleecy limbs, pushed her ears forward to show that she grasped the importance of Spurge’s suggestion, and guided Draba across the meadow. The sisters rolled in the water until their coats absorbed the innocuous odor of current-silked mud. Talus climbed out dripping. While she listened to the hair on her body dry, she reflected on her mother’s aloofness. Milfoil had been much more excited to see Draba. Maybe the black mare feared weakness. Rather, that weakness would compromise her ability to act in the best interests of the band.

“Talus, are you okay? You seem preoccupied,” Draba said, joining her sibling on the bank.

“Yes, I’m fine,” the grulla said. “Actually, I haven’t felt this peaceful in ages.”

Talus wasn’t lying. Nothing would deaden the anguish of parting with Spurge, but the future no longer appeared joyless. There was pleasure in growing up. There had to be pleasure in adulthood, too. It might arrive in the form of a stallion like Fireweed or a new section of Mount
Mesteño to explore or even the fulfillment of the dream that still flickered on the periphery of the filly’s consciousness: to become a leader. Possibly a great one. Possibly one whose name would outlive her, would inspire respect for years after her bones turned to powder.
Summer gentled Mount Mesteño. In the alpine meadows, the bunchgrass grew so long and heavy that it sprawled, pulled earthward by its own vitality. Farther down, the aspens, usually enveloped in the rustling of their own wind-stroked leaves, stood silent and still. Below them, in the juniper belt, nascent, intensely green vegetation faded to a soft teal. The sagebrush also changed; its bitter perfume dissipated, lingering only as a minty aura. Evidently the entire world was hushed by warmth. The entire world, but not the mustangs.

A madness seized Talus and her bandmates. It worried them like a swarm of flies. They bit imagined itches, switched their tails at shadows, and took rigorous dust baths. Still they suffered. Larkspur seemed the most afflicted. He guarded his mates with extreme precaution, shrilling his rage and pawing the earth if a rival male passed within a half mile of his territory. From time to time he even attacked other animals. A mule deer who dared to graze beside Milfoil learned not to mingle with wild horses the hard way. So did a coyote determined to snatch a mouthful of water from a spring Currant was using to cool her fetlocks. At such moments, the battle-scarred dun scarcely resembled the poised, confident stallion his family admired.

Yet the mares were not much better off. Restlessness as acute as Larkspur’s temper gripped them. Spurge pranced by default, Milfoil trotted in circles, and Currant trembled with excitement. Eventually the agitation spread to Talus and Draba. The yearlings frisked like three-month-old foals, pumping their tails up and down and kicking the air. They didn’t caper out of joy, but necessity. Talus felt that her body had been taken over by another, wilder filly. A filly
who hated her own skin, found it too hot, too tight, too close to her muscles. The grulla wanted nothing more than to slough her hide and thereby end her torment.

Yet longing lurked in her discomfort. At first she couldn’t tell what she craved. She simply enjoyed the sweet press of desire. Then one morning the wind carried her the brushy musk of a stallion. The smell was so faint it might have belonged to any number of horses, but she immediately thought of Fireweed. Did he lead a new gang of bachelors now? Or had he won his first mares at last? What was his type, anyway? Talus knew that some males preferred bays, some roans, some chestnuts. Perhaps Fireweed favored mustangs like her, mustangs with thundercloud heads, shrew-gray barrels, and barred legs.

“Is anything the matter?” Draba asked. The two were grazing in the valley after a short gallop to burn off excess energy. Their bandmates milled about behind them.

Talus said, “Take a sniff and see for yourself.”

Draba lifted her muzzle and widened her nostrils. A second later, she stiffened. “Who is it? Bistort? Fireweed?”

“I’m not sure. Fireweed, I hope.”

“Bistort’s handsomer. Bistort’s the handsomest horse on the mountain.”

“Fireweed’s stronger and faster. Well, he will be once he reaches full weight.”

Draba dismissed Talus’s opinion with a flick of her ears. Suddenly she grew serious. “Whoever he is,” she began, “whoever he is, he upsets me. Except I don’t mind. Why don’t I mind?”

The dunalino appeared desperate to understand her inner workings. Determined to ease her sister’s distress, Talus tried hard to make sense of the situation. She recalled the fight between Fireweed and Larkspur, recalled that Currant had behaved strangely before the clash
took place. Comprehension lit up her brain. This was “heat.” And “heat” meant the time had come for her to run with a stallion.

“You don’t mind because you’re not supposed to mind!” Talus cried. She whinnied and high-stepped through the grass, exhilarated by her realization.

Draba grasped the enormity of Talus’s words. Urgency—a persistent, salty odor—billowed from her coat. “We need to go. We need to go this instant.”

“What? Why? I’m excited, too, but I refuse to leave the band until Larkspur forces me. No mate is more important than my mother.”

“A week ago, my dam told me that mares are at their most attractive in heat. If we’re in heat, we should be off as soon as possible. That way we won’t have to wander for more than a few days; a stallion will seek us out.”

Talus lowered her head sadly. She couldn’t pick a flaw in the dunalino’s argument. Yet to leave her family before she had to…That would be like abandoning her own heart. It was too much to ask of her. Far too much. Indignation shortened and quickened her breath.

“I’m not going until Larkspur drives me away,” Talus said, pinning her ears for emphasis. “And I’m surprised you don’t feel the same. Are you tired of Milfoil or something?”

“No! Believe it or not, but my mother is as important to me as yours is to you. Even so, we need to be sensible. To act in our own best interests. I’m heading in the direction of that stallion this afternoon and I expect you to come with me,” Draba snapped.

Talus threw up her tail in shock. Her sister had never spoken to her—or anybody—with such authority. In spite of her growing respect for Draba, the grulla resented the power reversal. “Who do you think you’re talking to? I outrank you.”
“You’re about to lose your rank, Talus. You inherited it from Spurge. The moment you part with her, you’ll be just another young mustang out to prove herself.”

“I’ll still be stronger and faster than you.”

Talus whirled and galloped off through the dew-silvered grass. She hated that she had relapsed into her old, arrogant way of being, especially after her breakthrough at Willow Creek. But Draba’s statements were out of line. The roundup had humbled Talus. It had not made her willing to take orders from an underling. Plus, the possibility that Draba’s love for Milfoil matched hers for Spurge offended on many levels. No horse was as swift, brave, and beautiful as the black mare, so no horse could inspire greater affection in her daughter. Greater affection, and greater pain at separation.

“Why are you running? Is there danger?” Woodrush cried, fully extending herself to draw even with Talus.

The yearling cantered, then trotted, then walked. Her sibling fell in beside her.

“Everything’s fine. I’m just on edge,” she said.

“All the adults are on edge. Gentian, Yarrow, and I can’t figure out why.”

Talus paused to examine the loam-colored filly. Woodrush stared right back with an earnest expression. Her bewilderment was both touching and irritating. The grulla identified with the little one’s ache for knowledge but she didn’t want to be mistaken for an expert on a subject mysterious to her as well. “Spurge can answer your questions better than I can,” she said at last.

“You see, I’m pretty young myself. You only believe I’m wise because I’m bigger than you.”

“Oh,” Woodrush said as if presented with an astonishing truth. Talus almost laughed though Draba had put her in a sour mood.
Spurge jogged over to her offspring. “What’s the matter with you two? I hope you’re not complaining about me,” she said jokingly.

“Woodrush doesn’t understand why we’re so tense,” Talus explained.

Spurge gazed at her older daughter searchingly. “Do you understand?” she asked.

“I think so,” Talus said, choosing her words with care while her little sister lingered nearby. Woodrush studied her elders as if aware they were keeping something from her.

“It looks like Currant has had enough of Yarrow for one morning,” Spurge said to Woodrush. “Why don’t you go play with him? Show him the gopher hole you found yesterday.”

The loam-colored filly pinned her ears to indicate she was still suspicious and pranced off in the direction of her brother. Spurge turned to Talus. Silence stretched between them like the glistening afterbirth the grulla had tugged from her mother when she entered the world so long ago. A warm breeze tousled their forelocks and furrowed their coats. Uphill, in the juniper belt, a mockingbird released a panoply of borrowed songs intercut with its distinctive chatter.

“Is there anything you want to know about the agitation you’ve been feeling, Talus?” Spurge asked at last.

“Well, I know I’m in heat,” the young mustang said, “and I know that means I need to find a new band, a new stallion. But how can I tell when I’m supposed to leave? You said Larkspur would chase me away, but now Draba wants me to go with her later today.”

“Draba’s ready to seek out a mate before you? I guess she was bound to be first in something. Why are you hesitant about going with her? Surely you don’t want to be driven off by your father if you have another option. He’ll turn his attention on you soon, too. He’s been so preoccupied with his mates he hasn’t noticed his daughters are also in heat, but he will.”
Talus looked away in embarrassment. The mockingbird exhausted its repertoire and started over again, imitating the silvery purr of a waxwing. The grulla wished that music ordered her life as well. How easy it would be to repeat a single string of melodies all day, to ward off change with her voice alone...

“I don’t want to leave you until I have to,” the yearling said after a long pause. “I love you more than any filly could love her dam, no matter what Draba says.”

Spurge, obviously touched by her daughter’s uncharacteristic vulnerability, cried, “Oh, Talus, I love you, too, but you must put your well-being first. If you and Draba set off together, you may be claimed by the same stallion. Then you’ll have your best friend at your side for years to come. Don’t risk that kind of companionship for a few more days with me.”

“You want me to go?”

“Of course not. I often wish that my foals didn’t carry Larkspur’s blood so they could stay with me forever. But every wild horse has to take charge of her destiny at some point. Besides, aren’t you excited about the future? About all the adventures that await you?”

Talus remembered that the future had seemed less daunting only a week earlier, after her spirit-cleansing trip to Willow Creek. Where had that confidence gone now that she needed it? “I’d rather have adventures with you,” she said quietly.

Spurge stepped forward and set her head on Talus’s withers. The grulla pushed her nose into her mother’s warm-blooded neck. Both horses remained still, inhaling each other’s scents as hungrily as drowning creatures inhale air. Spurge smelled of a thousand grasses. Talus tried to memorize them all. Brome. Redtop. Foxtail. Timothy. Needle-and-thread. As long as the young mustang could recall her dam’s odor—the equine equivalent of a fingerprint—she need not feel alone. Every green place she encountered would contain a piece of the black mare.
“Talus,” Spurge said, “you couldn’t get rid of me if you wanted to. I’m in your blood. When you’re in trouble, my speed will carry you to safety. When you’re tired, my strength will pick up your feet. I won’t tell you what to do. I can’t tell you what to do. My father chased me away the second I came of age, so I didn’t have to make a choice. But I know one thing: you have nothing to fear from the world.”

Mother and daughter drew apart. The rest frolicked nearby. Larkspur, his nostrils flared, the skin inside them flushed, pranced around Milfoil. She pretended to be interested in a patch of clover. Currant observed the proceedings jealously. Meanwhile Gentian and Yarrow sniffed at the gopher hole Woodrush had discovered. They jumped each time the rodent emerged. Draba supervised the little ones, warning Yarrow not to stick his muzzle into the mound of dirt. He ignored her and received a nasty bite.

Spurge said, “I should return to Woodrush.”

“Go ahead. I’ll be okay,” Talus said.

Spurge trotted over to the loam-colored filly. Woodrush bounded to her mother, searched for a teat, and nursed with the necessary greed of the small. Sadness rolled through Talus like a current through a stream. She wasn’t envious. Just nostalgic.

“Talus,” Draba said, cantering to her sister, “I saw you talking to Spurge. Have you decided? Are you going with me?”

The grulla hesitated. Woodrush had finished her meal. She stood in the sun with her eyes closed. Completely happy, not because her stomach was full, but because Spurge had filled it. Talus used to experience such bliss regularly. Now it was Woodrush’s turn. “Yes. My dam told me we have a good chance of winding up with the same stallion if we leave together. I’d be foolish to waste an opportunity like that. Besides, this year’s foals deserve undivided attention.”
“I’m so glad. I always hoped we would be bandmates our entire lives.”

“Me, too, Draba. Me, too.”

Talus trembled with emotion. She didn’t remember Milfoil’s prediction that she and Draba would become as good friends as their parents, but she sensed the enormity of the moment. If only Bitterroot were there! But the fillies would have had to part with him regardless of the roundup. (Males stay with their families until they turn two since their sires need to teach them how to fight.) Somehow this comforted Talus. Bitterroot’s ghost—she pictured him as a specter even though he was probably still alive—vanished.

Talus and Draba left late in the afternoon. The sky had begun to redden. A soft pink glow spread from the summit of Mount Mesteño to the valley where the horses grazed. It turned the light-coated mustangs into living palettes, re-coloring them in its own image. The darker individuals—Spurge and Woodrush—shimmered as if fire blazed beneath their hides. Talus thought her bandmates had never looked so beautiful.

The yearlings said goodbye to their family members one by one. Talus took leave of her sire first, acknowledging him with a whinny instead of a nuzzle in case her heat triggered his rage. Next she touched noses with the foals; as she lowered her head to reach Woodrush, an intense sorrow sank its claws into her heart. The filly’s stunted frame was the physical embodiment of the roundup, of its life-altering power. Would Woodrush have been as strong as Talus under different circumstances? It was impossible to tell. The grulla turned away in grief only to find herself facing Currant and Milfoil. She groomed them each once more, reflecting on the strawberry roan’s kind nature and the dunalino’s quiet authority.

At last Talus approached Spurge. The young horse couldn’t remember her birth. She imagined it all the same. A mustang tottered to her feet in a bed of wildflowers and blinked in
amazement at the world. It was too bright, too loud, too huge. Too much. Then a creature as black as silt licked her, swabbing transparent fluid from her ruffled fur. Suddenly existence was not so terrible.

“Mother,” Talus said. Her throat closed before she could say anything else.

Spurge said, “I know.”

Somehow that was enough. Draba appeared at Talus’s side. The sisters trotted west, chasing the setting sun. When they came to the end of the valley, they paused to study their dams from a distance. As she gazed at Spurge’s silhouette, Talus recovered her voice.

“I won’t disappoint you anymore,” she said quietly. “When we meet again, I’ll be the leader you hoped I would be.”
CHAPTER 24

The grulla and the dunalino followed the scent of the stallion they had smelled earlier. It led them downhill through sagebrush scrub. Talus weaved in and out of the vegetation swiftly and silently. Draba shadowed her, wheezing but keeping pace. Night had snuffed Mount Mesteño. They couldn’t afford to tarry.

“Are you all right, Draba?” Talus called over her shoulder. “Speak up if you see any cover. We can rest as long as we’re protected.”

“No, I’m okay. Besides, in this darkness, I wouldn’t be able to find my tail if it weren’t attached to me,” Draba said between gasps.

“Who are we tracking, anyway? Most bands don’t spend the summer in the lower elevations. There’s less water.”

“Maybe we’re chasing a bachelor or a stallion who hasn’t won access to the best territory yet. Not everyone is as powerful as our father, you know.”

Talus propped in alarm. Draba crashed into the grulla’s hindquarters and shrilled her annoyance.

“Why did you stop?” the dunalino cried.

“It’s just… I don’t want to run with a weak stallion,” Talus said. “Maybe we should search a different part of the mountain.”

“Are you serious? Use your head. We’re in no position to be picky.”

Talus looked up at the night sky. It loomed over her like a dark blue basin turned upside down. She felt small. Vulnerable. Mortal. Draba was right. Any male was better than none. Two yearling fillies wouldn’t last long by themselves. Especially after the sun had set. Perhaps they
should have stayed in the valley until dawn. But how could they have guessed the stallion would be so hard to find? Resigned, Talus blew air through her nostrils and moved forward again.

She grew uneasy a few minutes later. There was something familiar about the smell they were trailing. A grassiness reminiscent of Spurge and Talus herself. The urge to flee made the grulla’s muscles tingle and her stomach roil. Draba, however, showed no signs of distress. The dunalino even seemed to relish the odor. Talus could hear her inhaling deeply.

The horses came to a break in the sagebrush and halted. Bistort stood before them in a swathe of moonlight. He was sleeping with his ears limp and his upper lip extended in an expression of surrender. Talus had never seen a male so relaxed. At first she couldn’t figure out why her brother had lowered his defenses. Then he transferred his weight from hoof to hoof and she noticed an open wound on his left shoulder. The gory divot must have been inflicted by a rival’s sharp forefeet.

“What’s wrong with him?” Draba asked. “He’s as laidback as a mare with her mate nearby.”

Talus said, “I think he lost a fight—and his family. He’s lethargic because he’s depressed. Come on. We need to leave quietly. A moment ago, I got a queasy sensation in my gut. Now I know why. It’s not natural for a mustang to join up with a relative.”

“Well, I don’t share any blood with him.”

“Draba! He has no band! He’s handsome, but can he defend you on his own?”

Talus’s exclamation woke Bistort. His ears snapped to attention. He stepped toward them, excited by the presence of young females. Talus retreated into the sagebrush. She paused to wait for Draba.
“I remember you,” Bistort said. “You’re Milfoil’s daughter. You look exactly like your mother.”

“We’re both dunalinos,” Draba said awkwardly. She appeared overwhelmed by the stallion’s beauty. Even with his fiery undercoat doused by the gloom and his sleek body quivering with pain, the smoky black was spectacular. Grief slowed Talus’s pulse. It seemed she would have to part with her best friend after all.

Bistort laughed. “Of course you are. But you also have the same refined muzzle and graceful neck. Don’t forget I was bandmates with your dam when I was a colt and she belonged to my sire Finch. I always admired her.”

Talus snorted. Mares didn’t belong to their stallions any more than their stallions belonged to them. The grulla couldn’t believe a son of Spurge could be so dismissive of the opposite sex. Her respect for Bistort dwindled.

“Who’s that with you?” the smoky black said to Draba. Talus backpedaled, hoping the clean but thick odor of the shrubbery would hide her scent. It was no use. Her brother flared his nostrils, froze, and trembled. He seemed to be teetering between two instincts: the disgust Talus had experienced earlier and intense physical attraction.

“Draba,” the young mustang said, “Draba, I have to go. Please come with me.”

“Oh, Talus, I don’t know what to do,” the dunalino said. She quaked from her withers to her rump.

Bistort advanced upon his sister, his head lowered and his tail raised. The whites of his eyes glowed in the murk, shrinking as his pupils dilated. Talus glanced at Draba one last time—the blonde filly shimmered in the moonlight like something precious but lost—and wheeled
around. She aimed a kick at Bistort’s injured shoulder, heard him grunt as she struck already broken skin, and galloped off as fast as she could without stumbling in the darkness.

Talus didn’t slow down until she was sure she had left Bistort far behind. Anger speared her gut. She would never have as good a friend as Draba. For a second she considered retracing her steps to reason with her sibling. Now that she realized she could outpace Bistort, she wasn’t afraid. But Talus remembered her vow to understand Draba. Perhaps the dunalino genuinely wanted to spend her adult life with Bistort. In that case, it would be unfair to pressure her to spurn him. The grulla sighed and walked on.

She was more alone than she had ever been. Not even the brisk patter of rabbits’ feet and the groggy calls of waking owls could convince her other animals existed. Only the wind comforted her. When it surged between her ears, through her mane, and along her spine, she imagined a huge tongue massaging her coat. She wished that tongue belonged to Spurge.

Talus altered course to travel northwest instead of southwest. Just as she broke into a trot, hoofbeats sent vibrations up her shins. A horse was approaching at a canter. Talus paused. Her stomach writhed with anticipation. Every hair on her frame prickled. The next moment, Draba burst into view. Draba, who smelled like clover and crushed flowers and happiness.

“What’s the matter? Why aren’t you with Bistort?” Talus asked.

“He’s just a stallion. You’re my sister,” Draba said. “I should have followed you sooner, but…I can’t explain it. He was so handsome.”

Talus thought of Fireweed. “It’s all right. I get it.”

The yearlings looked at each other uncertainly. They had no idea where to go. After a long silence, it dawned on Talus that Draba was waiting for her to lead the way to their next
destination. The grulla sensed how much she had to learn about navigating Mount Mesteño. But
they couldn’t linger in the sagebrush scrub. Talus gathered herself and headed uphill.
Talus and Draba spent the rest of the night in a juniper thicket. By the time they woke in the peppery darkness of the trees, the sun was approaching its zenith. Talus’s ears regained consciousness before she did. They twitched, rotated to take in Draba’s somnolent movements, and stood upright like two leaves blown on end. The filly opened her eyes. Something was wrong. She peered through a gap in the foliage. The source of her unease appeared a moment later.

“Draba,” Talus said, prodding her companion, “Draba, we’re in danger.”

The dunalino lifted her head, instantly alert. She asked, “What is it? What do you see?”

“There’s a mountain lion in the clearing beyond the thicket.”

The yearlings watched the wildcat from their verdant hideaway. It wasn’t hunting—its strides lacked tension and its round-tipped tail dragged the ground—but its mood would change in an instant if it spotted them. Talus shuddered. She had never wanted her sire more. No predator would attack a powerful, adult mustang, but adolescents were fair game. Panic descended on the grulla. When the lion stopped to stretch, extending its forelegs, arching its back, and yawning so that its pink tongue curled toward its vicious upper teeth, she was gripped by the desire to run. Fortunately Draba’s presence reminded her of the consequences of bolting from cover.

“It might not be able to smell us over the scent of the juniper. Let’s stay where we are for now,” Talus whispered.

Draba flicked an ear in assent but said in an equally low voice, “If it comes any closer, it’s bound to notice us. Then we’ll have to flee.”
“With a decent lead, we should be able to escape. They’re sprinters. They tire fast.”

“Talus, promise me this. If we have to fly for our lives and I fall behind, you won’t slow down...or look over your shoulder.”

The grulla dismissed her sister’s concern with a toss of her mane, yet terror made sweat break out on her withers and loins. It hadn’t occurred to her that she only needed to gallop faster than weak-lunged Draba to survive. The thought filled her with a mixture of relief and guilt. What would Spurge do in a similar situation? Accept the loss of a friend or gamble her own safety? Where did selflessness end and stupidity begin?

“Promise me,” Draba repeated. When Talus said nothing, the dunalino added, “Take me seriously for a change!”

Talus snapped, “I am taking you seriously!”

The mountain lion didn’t hear their hushed yet urgent conversation, but a scrub jay did. It scolded them from its perch overhead. Talus and Draba shrank together. This drew the big cat’s attention. Its vertical pupils widened and its hooked claws emerged from their furry sheaths. There was no doubt it had sensed their proximity.

Without a word, the horses turned and sped out of the thicket. Behind them, the lion also took off. Talus pointed one ear backward to track its progress. Branches splintered as it entered and then exited the junipers. After that, a terrible silence punctuated by the scratch of coarse pads on rocky soil told the grulla it was running flat-out. Since they were in open country except for the cover they had just left, it would soon catch up. Talus tried to remember where the nearest forested area lay in the hope that cluttered terrain would give them the advantage, but she didn’t know the land beyond Larkspur’s range very well. They would simply have to stay ahead of their pursuer as long as possible.
Talus accelerated. Draba kept up for a few strides, gasped for air, and weakened. A rank, curdled odor—the stench of flesh-fed creatures—drew closer. Fear urged Talus to dig in and find another gear. Love anchored her to her sister’s side. Again, she asked herself what Spurge would do. No answer came to her. The black mare was so perfectly balanced between courage and reason that not even her daughter could guess which quality would rise to the fore in times of danger. Yet perhaps that didn’t matter. Talus, not Spurge, was in jeopardy. Talus, not Spurge, had to make a choice. And the filly knew one thing: she couldn’t leave Draba. Not after nearly losing her to Bistort.

The dunalino must have anticipated her sister’s decision. As soon as Talus slackened her pace so that the two yearlings were on even terms, Draba changed direction, drawing the mountain lion with her. The grulla squealed in dismay. She wheeled to see the other horse sprinting downhill. Draba’s body seemed to lengthen with effort. Her head was low, her neck stretched, her legs extended, her yellow tail flung out like a spray of needlegrass. Still the lion gained. Talus would recall that image for the rest of her life. It became synonymous with both horror and courage.

The young mustang didn’t realize she was tearing after her sibling until the lion’s sun-bronzed rump rose and fell in front of her. In a few more bounds, it would be close enough to pounce on Draba. Talus surged. Her muscles bulged and thickened with the agony of her charge. But a second later the pain fell away, an old skin. She reached a speed she had never touched before. The sky transformed into a blue wind, the earth into a brown river. All four of her hooves left the ground. She passed the lion, swerved, and hurtled between it and Draba.
The predator turned on instinct and chased Talus instead. It was beginning to labor. So was she. They breathed in tandem. Merged into a single animal at odds with itself. One part wanted to live, one to eat. There could be no compromise.

Hunter and hunted careened southeast. Talus detected the coursing of an unfamiliar stream somewhere nearby. She followed it. She wasn’t sure why. Maybe the sound of water reminded her of the creek in her band’s favorite meadow. Of safety. Of Spurge.

Saplings reared from the exposed dirt. The stream gushed behind them, flat, green, and wide. Talus rushed forward, desperation wringing a final burst of energy from her limbs. She crashed through the young trees, gathered herself, and leaped as far as she could. Her body usually felt light, even hollow, like the bones of a bird, when she was airborne. Now it seemed pulled downward by a strange and relentless undertow. The undertow of her exhaustion. In another moment, she would land in the water, the lion on the isle of her back. Then blood would billow and spread in the current.

Talus had underestimated her strength. She sailed over the stream with her black mane flying and her front feet tucked to her barrel. Before she struck the bank, she uncoiled her forelegs. A second later, the filly found herself miraculously upright. Her shins smarted from the force of her landing and spasms flowed from her withers to her croup, but she was intact. Whole. Alive.

An angry, cough-like snarl made Talus look behind her. The mountain lion paced the opposite shore, the skin above its nose crimped with rage. Something had discouraged it from attempting the jump or swimming after its prey. It spat in the grulla’s direction and padded off, tail at half-mast.

“Talus! Talus, are you all right?”
The mustang raised her head and cocked her ears. Draba was galloping up, her eyes huge with concern. She must have forded the stream to the west and followed the hunt from a distance. The dunalino slowed as she approached, her sides dripping with lather so thick it resembled foam in a creek. Her breath left her nostrils and mouth in short, shaken gusts.

“I guess,” Talus said, bending her knees experimentally. “I’m a little sore, but there’s no permanent damage. What about you?”

“Okay. Tired. I doubt I’ll be able to travel much today.”

“Me, too. Let’s rest here for a while. We’ll be safe as long as that lion doesn’t return. I think it had enough between the two of us, though.”

Talus froze, surprised by her own declaration. She and Draba had indeed overcome the lion together. Each had risked her life for the other and that was the only reason both had survived. The yearlings exchanged meaningful glances. An unspoken alliance was sealed. Neither horse would ever again ask her sister to desert her as Draba had in the junipers. They were partners. And like true partners, they would rather die flank to flank than go on alone.

“Well, I never thought I’d see a couple of youngsters outsmart a mountain lion,” a voice said from a stand of mature trees.

Talus and Draba whirled to face the speaker. A bay mare with a colt at her hip stepped into the open. A second female, a large blue roan, also emerged. Talus suddenly understood why the lion had retreated. It had sensed the presence of adult mustangs.

“They used to run with Bistort,” Draba whispered. “Where could their new mate be?”

The grulla had already recognized their unwitting saviors: the bay was the dam of Bistort’s only daughter from the previous year’s foal crop and the blue roan was Lupine’s mother Thistle. Both seemed fully recovered from the roundup. When the sun illuminated their coats,
dapples welled under their skin in honeycomb patterns—a sign of good health. Yet, they, too, probably bore emotional wounds. Injuries that would not heal. That could not be allowed to heal. For, as Talus had discovered at Willow Creek, the culled survived in pain alone.

“You shouldn’t be surprised, Hopsage,” Thistle said. “These two carry the blood of Larkspur. What’s more, their dams are Spurge and Milfoil.”

Hopsage studied the fillies with intelligent, black-lashed eyes. Though plain compared to her cobalt friend—she was a uniform brown except for her dark mane, muzzle, legs, and tail—her face pleased Talus. Its openness reminded the young mustang of Penstemon. “Yes,” Hopsage said at last, “yes, I should have seen Spurge’s power in the grulla and Milfoil’s staunchness in the dunalino. But they’ve grown so much since our bands wintered together in the sagebrush scrub.”

Talus and Draba straightened at the mention of their parents. Hopsage obviously held their mothers in high esteem. Perhaps, in the near future, they would inspire equal reverence. Emboldened, Talus blew into Hopsage’s nostrils. The bay returned the greeting, giving the yearling permission to speak.

“We ran into Bistort a day ago. He was hurt. Did he lose you to another stallion?” Talus asked.

Thistle said, “Yes, early this week a bachelor challenged and defeated him.” The charred foliage scent of bitterness radiated from the blue roan. Talus remembered Lupine’s boast: “My dam is Bistort’s favorite mate.” The grulla felt a sudden, sharp pity. No mare could choose her patriarch. She simply had to accompany the strongest male interested in her. It was the way of things; only the best horses deserved to reproduce. Yet nature’s laws did not always coincide with the laws of the heart.
Eagerness brushed aside Talus’s sympathy. Thistle had referenced a bachelor. Could Fireweed have claimed Bistort’s band? And if so, where was he? Surely he would also want her…

A high, clear whinny interrupted the filly’s thoughts. Thistle, Hopsage, and the colt answered it. A pair of voices drifted to the mustangs on the wind.

“I told you they hadn’t gone far,” said the first.

“All the same, you can’t let them wander,” the second replied. “You won’t win their trust until you show some responsibility. They’re testing you.”

“It’s that Thistle. She doesn’t like me. She wouldn’t let me cover her and now she’s not in heat anymore.”

“She’ll come around once you’ve proven yourself. Trust me. I’ve run with inexperienced stallions before.”

A silver buckskin and a red dun trotted out of the trees. Talus’s pulse quickened. She would have known the new arrivals anywhere.

“Aster!” the young horse cried. “Fireweed!” Beside her, Draba bobbed her head excitedly. If the sisters could join a group led by the one mare more capable than Spurge and the one stallion who rivaled Larkspur, their safety would be assured. They couldn’t believe their good luck. It startled them.

Aster seemed equally surprised. She tossed her charcoal-colored forelock out of her face as if it had played a trick on her eyes. Yet the old mustang didn’t appear displeased. In fact, an odd combination of joy and urgency lit up her gaze. Talus wondered what it meant. For a moment she was troubled. Did Aster expect great things of her? Why? Hadn’t the silver buckskin heard about her dash from the aspens? News spread quickly from band to band.
Fireweed was less taken aback than Aster. He looked at Talus and Draba intently—both fillies would remain in heat for a few more days—but without the agitation stallions usually displayed when they happened upon unattached females. Perhaps he had long suspected that the grulla found him attractive and would seek him out when she came of age. The possibility unnerved, humiliated, and even angered Talus. But the feeling passed in a matter of seconds. Fireweed was too awe-inspiring to resent.

At five years old, he had reached full weight. The muscles along his neck, shoulders, and hindquarters had grown thick and hard as burls on an oak tree. Yet they did not give him the cumbersome quality that afflicted many horses of similar strength. On the contrary, his movements were lighter and more dynamic than before. And his coat! It gleamed the fierce orange of sunset touching the highest branches in a forest.

“Talus, Draba, what brings you to this part of the mountain?” Aster inquired. “There are predators in the area. Didn’t you spot the signs?”

Fireweed laughed and said, “Of course they did. But Spurge’s little grulla isn’t afraid of anything. She’s like me. Reckless.”

Aster sniffed as if to say lack of caution was nothing to boast about, but Talus flicked her ears forward. The yearling couldn’t help but be pleased by Fireweed’s comparison. She detested his use of the word “little,” though. The bond that had formed between them the night they destroyed the pen gave her the right to be considered his equal in courage, if not brawn.

“No, we weren’t suspicious in the slightest,” Draba said to Aster in her characteristic clear-sighted manner. “We didn’t know there was danger until a lion went after us. We barely got away.”
“It sounds like you two still have a lot to learn,” the silver buckskin said. Talus sensed that she was being addressed though the lead mare remained focused on Draba.

“Maybe so, but they have attributes that can’t be taught. Bravery. Loyalty. Instinct,” Thistle said with an air of giving credit where credit is due. “They didn’t just make a lucky escape—they took turns running the beast ragged. And the grulla cleared the stream. Hopsage, Starwort, and I saw everything.”

Aster glanced at the bay and the colt Talus assumed was Starwort. They nodded. The silver buckskin’s skepticism changed to admiration. “Well, Fireweed, don’t you think our band wouldn’t be complete without such resourceful youngsters?” she said.

Fireweed pretended to consider the matter. Talus could tell he had already decided to let her join his family, but she still lifted her head, tossed her forelock so the star between her eyes showed, and pricked her ears. The red dun circled the fillies, assessing them with mock severity. When he drew close, Talus distended her nostrils involuntarily. A bewitching scent stuck to the sensitive skin in her nasal passages like flies to a spider’s web. It was not grassy or brushy or floral like the odors of most of her fellow horses. Instead, it called to mind sun-baked earth cooled by a light rain. Something stirred in the grulla’s chest. Something ancient. It loosened the muscles around her heart as if the organ needed slack to search her insides. To search for a clue that would unlock the mystery of its own accelerated beat.

Fireweed stood in front of the yearlings once again. His playfulness vanished. He stepped up to Draba and offered her his muzzle. They exchanged breath, sealing their new bond as bandmates. Fireweed gave the dunalino an affectionate nip and turned to Talus. He bumped his nose against hers, snorted into her nostrils, and waited for a response.
The grulla paused. She knew that what she was about to do would end her association with Larkspur, Spurge, and the rest forever. Several seconds passed. Talus looked at Fireweed’s rugged yet refined features but saw her mother. Then a warm summer breeze carried the black ghost away. The young mustang mimicked Fireweed’s gesture and became part of his band.

“We’re happy to have you,” the former bachelor said. “Now, Aster, I could use a mud bath to take the sting out of that bite Bistort gave me. Where’s the nearest waterhole?”

The silver buckskin held Fireweed’s gaze. “Listen, I know you like it here, but I don’t think it would be wise to stay in Bistort’s territory.”

“I can fend him off any day.”

“Can you fend off Larkspur, though? He’d be your nearest neighbor.”

Aster spoke with the aloofness of a mare who had partnered many stallions. Talus imagined the old horse didn’t care which male she ran with yet felt obligated to advise each co-leader. Fireweed hesitated, clearly annoyed at having his judgment questioned. Draba nudged Talus. The grulla flicked an ear to acknowledge her sister’s concern. If the red dun remained in Bistort’s home range and lost his bandmates to Larkspur, the fillies would be left without a protector.

“All right,” Fireweed said. “We’ll find somewhere else to live. But I won’t hide from Larkspur. I’m as big as he is now.”

Aster said, “Let’s go, then. I’ll take you to the westernmost reaches of the mountain. There’s a large cirque we can use as a base. It’s only a few thousand feet below the summit. A wild, windswept place where no one except the sheep will bother us.”

Talus quivered at the thought of travelling to such a high, lonely pocket of Mount Mesteño with her new family. She imagined the cirque waiting for them. It was a depression
fleeced with ground-hugging plants. A tarn shimmered in its center like water collecting in the pit of a hoofprint. The grulla sensed it would become as dear to her as the meadow and the valley in Larkspur’s territory. As Aster led the mustangs away from the stream, happiness quickened Talus’s steps even though her race for survival had deadened her muscles.

But when habit carried the filly to the front of the group, the lead mare snorted a warning. Talus retreated, bumping into Thistle. The blue roan dropped her head and tensed her muzzle. She was not about to surrender her position as second-in-command. Talus backpedaled again. Hopsage pranced past her, neck arched. Starwort followed his mother. Talus lashed her tail. She didn’t expect the gentle bay to outrank her, too. For an instant she considered asserting herself with bites and kicks.

“Remember what I told you before we left home,” Draba said, falling in beside Talus. “We don’t have the same status as our dams anymore. If you want to be like Spurge one day, you’ll have to work your way up from the bottom.”

Talus eyeballed Draba. As usual, the dunalino was right. The young horse stopped whipping her tail to and fro to indicate that she accepted her demotion. Yet as the freshly formed band trotted west with Aster as guide and Fireweed as guard, disappointment descended on Talus like a bird of prey. Everything around her throbbed with life and love and beauty. The sky was the pallid blue of speedwell petals, the earth was a puzzle of gray and green shrubbery, and the wind nickered in the mustangs’ ears. Talus shuddered. The contrast between the vitality of the land and her low spirits honed her melancholy to pain. She had passed out of Spurge’s shadow into the humbling light of independence and she was terrified.
The journey to the cirque lasted hours—the terrain was perilous and the horses did not yet trust each other. Thistle ignored Fireweed’s attempts to set her at ease; she trotted away whenever he tried to groom her or nibble her ears in an invitation to play. Hopsage also avoided the stallion and kept Starwort near in case the red dun didn’t take to the foal. The colt, a handsome but dull-witted little fellow, watched Fireweed closely, perplexed by his mother’s fear. Talus and Draba gave both Bistort’s former mares and his conqueror wide berths. They were intimidated by the mature females’ superior size, strength, and knowledge of the mountain. Fireweed only deepened their discomfort. Though the yearlings admired him, they dared not get too friendly until they went out of heat. Their bodies remained somewhat mysterious, but they sensed they could not deliver foals safely before their hips broadened.

Only Aster seemed unperturbed, though Talus suspected that anxiety coursed beneath the silver buckskin’s serenity. A horse couldn’t grow up at the side of a lead mare and not recognize a false show of confidence. Such displays were necessary to suppress panic. If the others realized that Aster, too, was troubled by the band’s lack of cooperation, their nervousness would increase. And mustangs on edge put themselves and their companions at risk.

A slight swagger entered Talus’s step. She alone knew Aster’s secret. A secret of leadership. Of power. As the grulla looked past Starwort, Hopsage, and Thistle at Aster’s age-sharpened yet powerful hindquarters, she knew that she still wanted greatness. Guilt immediately soured her pride. Was it possible to strive for glory and selflessness?

Just as the day took on the opaque quality of late afternoon, the horses encountered a river that dwarfed the stream Talus had leaped to escape the mountain lion. It flowed west, its
intensely blue water whitening where it collided with rocks or fallen trees. Thistle and Hopsage backed up, bobbing their heads in agitation. Fireweed drove them forward with bites to the rear. Apparently the mustangs had to brave the current to reach the cirque. It would be their first test as a family.

Aster faced her bandmates. “We should be able to withstand the force of the river,” she said, “but to be safe I want the younger horses to cross to the right of their elders so they won’t be swept away if they lose their footing. Hopsage, obviously you’ll stay with Starwort. Thistle, watch Draba. Fireweed, stick with Talus.”

The silver buckskin gathered herself and walked into the water. She flinched when the current connected with her barrel but remained standing. Thistle pricked her ears, her fear eradicated by the immediacy of the task. The blue roan splashed in, waited for Draba to join her, and followed Aster. Hopsage went next, Starwort at her shoulder. The colt leaned on his mother for support. His light, spindly frame scared Talus. She thought of Woodrush. Perhaps this foal had been stunted by the roundup as well. At least she was not responsible for his little-ing.

“Are you ready?” Fireweed asked. “You know, this isn’t the best time to daydream. Focus on the moment and only the moment if you want to make it to the other side.”

“I will!” Talus assured him, embarrassed by her carelessness. She refocused and plunged into the river with the red dun beside her.

The cold struck her like a physical force. For a second she stopped breathing. But on the opposite bank, Aster was scrambling out of the water. Thistle and Draba were not far behind. If they could do it, why couldn’t she? Talus braced herself and moved forward. The current added weight to her legs. Each stride seemed to pull the flesh from the bone. Yet the lion had taught her how far she could push her body before it quit on her. She had not reached that point. In fact, she
began to enjoy the crossing. There was something intoxicating about the way her hooves sank into the mud at the bottom of the river only to spring free so suddenly she thought she would tumble, about experiencing exhaustion without heat, about the water roaring like a wind-broke mustang.

Talus’s euphoria came to an abrupt end. In front of her, Starwort capsized. Hopsage, who had chosen the wrong instant to glance to the left, did not see him fall and continued to advance. Without a larger horse to impede his progress, the colt shot past his mother and started to spin in the current.

“Help!” he cried, managing to keep his head above the angry blue surface. “Please help me!”

Hopsage turned in horror and launched herself after her son, but the foal was already too far away. She couldn’t reach him in time. Fireweed had a chance, though. The red dun let the river carry him to Starwort, splayed his legs to bring his great body to a halt, and seized the youngster by the withers. Hopsage gasped when the stallion’s teeth closed on her baby. On the bank, Aster and Thistle propped. Talus understood their terror. Starwort’s helplessness might call forth the violence that lurked deep inside Fireweed. Inside every male.

They needn’t have worried. The red dun swung the colt to the right and relaxed his hold. Talus half-ran, half-swam to them.

“What do you want me to do?” she cried.

“Flank Starwort,” Fireweed said. “He’s not going anywhere in between us.”

Talus positioned herself alongside the foal. His eyes were so wide she could count the veins that forked through them like bloody lightning. Tenderness constricted her throat. But she couldn’t give in to sentiment. Not yet.
With Hopsage watching them nervously, the red dun and the grulla guided Starwort to safety. The colt was disoriented by his ordeal. He kept pressing against either Fireweed or Talus though the water browned and slowed as the horses neared dry land. After a long and cold struggle, they tugged themselves out of the current and stood dripping next to their bandmates.

Hopsage checked Starwort for injuries, poking his ribs with her muzzle. The others looked on in tense silence; the foal appeared more shaken than hurt, but only his dam could say for sure. At last the bay mare withdrew. Starwort was okay.

“Thank goodness,” Aster said.

“No, thank Fireweed,” Thistle corrected her. The blue roan regarded the stallion with respect, maybe admiration.

Hopsage licked her son’s face, swabbing his eyes and nostrils as she must have on the day of his birth. Talus felt embarrassed in spite of the protectiveness that had surged through her on the river. She turned to Draba, but the dunalino was gazing at Hopsage and Starwort with obvious delight. The hair behind the grulla’s ears tingled. She wheeled to find Aster studying her.

Before Talus could ask the silver buckskin what was wrong, Starwort pulled away from his dam. The colt approached Fireweed and bumped his nose against the stallion’s. For a moment the red dun merely stared at the bedraggled creature—Starwort’s fur had started to dry in rifts and whorls. Then Hopsage nickered, her voice soft and encouraging. Fireweed lowered his head and nuzzled the foal. When he glanced up again, the mares had surrounded him, their eyes shining with gratitude and faith in their young leader.

As the red dun gazed at his bandmates, his eyes changed, too. They brightened, not with pride in his heroics, but with the sober light of responsibility. A wild, wonderstruck joy opened
in Talus like a flower. Fireweed had gone from a bachelor playing at leadership to a true patriarch in a matter of seconds. And his rite-of-passage increased the other mustangs’ belief in one another as well. The distance between Bistort’s mares and Larkspur’s daughters dwindled. They were a real family now, united by their allegiance to Aster and Fireweed.

“Come,” the silver buckskin said, her previous tension dropping away, “we can still reach the cirque by nightfall.”

Aster set a northerly course and the horses trailed after her in their proper order. If Talus could have observed her companions from afar, she would have thought they made a pretty picture. Would have loved the way their coats graded from graying snow to pocked slate, from mahogany to damp granite, from fall aspen to river clay. Since she couldn’t, she simply reveled in being part of a group whose members would risk their lives for each other. It was enough.

It would have to be to get the mustangs to the cirque. The farther they traveled, the steeper the terrain became. Pain shot from Talus’s rear hooves to her hocks. She wanted to gallop or at least canter to finish the climb sooner, but the soil was too rocky for quick movements. Even though Aster eased to a walk whenever the ground grew treacherous, the horses stumbled regularly, sending loose stones pinging down the mountain. The sound gave Talus vertigo. Vegetation was scarce in the upper elevations, so the rocks, unimpeded, seemed to roll on forever. The grulla took a few woozy steps. The scree beneath her feet crumbled and she pitched forward onto her knees.

“Are you okay?” Draba called from behind. “Try focusing on something right in front of you.”

Talus cried, “I’m fine! I just wasn’t paying attention.” She couldn’t let her bandmates see her weakness.
Yet she wasn’t the only one toiling. Ahead of her, Hopsage and Starwort quivered and tossed their forelocks as if the thinning air bothered them more than a swarm of flies. Thistle, too, showed signs of irritation. She swung her tail back and forth almost angrily. Talus realized that she and her companions were fighting one of their deepest instincts: distrust of high, narrow places where they could not use their swiftness to their advantage.

Aster paused at the base of a slope made entirely of rock fragments—the type of incline that had given Talus her name—and looked down at her bandmates. A wind freshened by the half-melted snow that glazed the summit of Mount Mesteño tousled her dark mane.

“The cirque lies over this hill,” the old horse called, her voice blown straight into the ears of her followers. “Climb carefully. The stones are loose. If you get lightheaded, stare at the ground. You need to watch where you’re going, anyway.”

Hopsage glanced at Starwort. Sweat spangled his coat. “There must be an easier route,” the bay mare said. It was a foolish statement. Without trees to block their view, the mustangs could see the entire mountain stretching out below them like a series of drops in a waterfall. The river they had forded yielded to the juniper-studded country where Talus had fled the lion, which in turn plunged into Bistort’s sagebrush refuge. If an alternate path to the cirque existed, someone would have spotted it.

“You know there isn’t, Hopsage,” Aster said, her eyes kind.

Resigned, the horses began their final trek to the cirque. Talus, still unsettled, locked her gaze on her hooves and the rocks beneath them. Gradually her queasiness subsided. The hike became just another act of exertion. And she could handle exertion.

As Talus’s confidence increased, the urge to stare at the sky seized her with irresistible force. She lifted her head inch by inch. The brown hindquarters of Hopsage and Starwort hove
into view. Above them, Thistle planted her feet with studied lightness; a big mustang, she could pelt her bandmates with scree if she took a bad step. Beyond her, entering the final, heart-searching meters of their journey on deer-like legs, sprang Aster. Over the silver buckskin, orange, pink, and purple clouds scudded through the air so rapidly they appeared slow-moving.

Talus gasped. The incline obscured the summit of Mount Mesteño. Without that point of reference, it seemed the horses were marching into the heavens themselves. The thought stirred the grulla. She felt intensely happy to be alive and intensely sad to be mortal. If a higher power had fixed her in the present, had put her dreams and desires on hold forever, she would not have been sorry.

But all adventures come to an end. The bandmates crested the hill and descended into the cirque like a living rockslide. Aster pulled up when the earth leveled out and the others gathered around her. The horses trembled and blinked glassy eyes, overcome by the stress of their travels. But as their heads cleared, their lungs cooled, and their sweat dried, their spirits lifted. Their new home was everything the silver buckskin had promised.
CHAPTER 27

The cirque was not beautiful like the alpine meadows and undulating valleys where Talus had spent her youth. It was too coarse, too stony, too sparsely vegetated to be beautiful. Yet the grulla had never seen anything more magnificent. A gigantic, oblong depression with steep walls, the cirque could have been a world unto itself. Its jagged sides plunged into a gray-green swathe of grass broken up by clusters of sandwort and the occasional spray of paintbrush or lupine. In its center a snow-battened tarn gleamed like an iridescent robin’s egg in an enormous nest. The water lay undisturbed in its bed—the wind that coursed from the summit passed over instead of into the cirque. Best of all, the place showed no sign of other horses. Fireweed would not have to fend off rival stallions on a regular basis, a tall order for a first-time band leader.

“This is wonderful, Aster,” Thistle said, her white-ticked body reddened by the setting sun so that it contrasted sharply with her dark head. “No competition, no wind, plenty to drink…How did you find such a perfect location?”

Something sad entered the silver buckskin’s eyes. She said, “I lived here when I was a young mare. Anyway, it isn’t perfect. The grass is pretty thin. But there’s good grazing nearby. I’ll show you tomorrow. For now, rest and recover.”

The old mustang trotted off to speak to Fireweed. Talus pricked her ears. She turned to ask Draba if Aster seemed upset, but the dunalino had followed Thistle to the tarn. Talus hurried after her bandmates.

The yearling drank deeply. When she finished, she approached Thistle and Hopsage. Shyness slowed her step in the spite of the camaraderie established by the river crossing.
The blue roan lifted her muzzle from a patch of threadbare grass. “Are you all right, Talus?” she asked with surprising kindness. Thistle’s refusal to call off her son once he had beaten Bitterroot had left the grulla with a bad impression of the mare. Perhaps the loss of Lupine had made her more empathetic.

“Yes,” Talus said gratefully. “It’s just…what’s the matter with Aster?”

Thistle said, “Nothing. She’s the wisest horse on the mountain. A little eccentric, maybe, but age will do that.”

“She looked sad a moment ago, though. And she’s been staring at me all day.”

Hopsage glanced up from nursing Starwort. “Don’t let her rattle you,” the bay said. “She often studies us. You’ll get used to it.”

Thistle dipped her head in agreement. “She scrutinized my every move after Bistort claimed me. It was intimidating, but now we’re good friends.”

Draba gazed in Aster’s direction. Talking about the silver buckskin behind her back clearly set the filly on edge. She changed the topic, crying, “Hopsage, how’s Starwort?”

While Hopsage and Draba fussed over Starwort, who protested that he was being treated like a newborn, Talus continued her conversation with Thistle.

The grulla leaned in and said, “Is Aster sad because of the roundup? Because she’s starting a new life in a new place without every member of her family?”

“I really don’t know,” Thistle said. “Aster has lost bandmates before. And she stopped producing foals years ago, so she no longer has to worry about being separated from her own sons and daughters. We had more than our share of suffering last spring, though. The humans didn’t just take our colts. They wiped out an entire generation.”
Talus pushed her ears forward: an equine question. Above the horses, the sky had turned a deep blue rapidly darkening to black. Thistle gazed at it for a moment. Perhaps she thought its departing color reflected the sorrow of life—her voice grew husky with bitterness when she spoke again.

"After we returned to our home range, exhausted by our run from the silver bird, dazed by the culling of our young males, we pinned our hopes on the foals due in the coming season. Convinced ourselves they would heal us or at least restore our will to survive. As the earth warmed, our hearts did, too.

“One by one, we left to give birth. One by one, we rejoined the band in grief. The roundup had sucked the strength from our offspring. I delivered a filly who couldn’t stand. She died at my feet. Witchgrass, the bay mare whose son was culled, dropped...something...already dead. I think the shock of foaling such a deformed creature killed her. Or maybe the baby inflicted damage we couldn’t see. Either way, she didn’t wake the following morning.”

Thistle paused, her sleek body shaking with rage. Talus knew the blue roan would never forget the sight of her friend lying still on the ground. Still, but not at peace. The image would linger in her mind until her death, would not vanish until she herself vanished. The thought summoned the grulla’s own collage of pain: Penstemon’s wrecked leg, Bitterroot’s final whinny, Vetch’s depression exploding into anger...Thankfully, Thistle began to speak once more.

“In the end, only Hopsage’s colt—Starwort, obviously—survived. But he isn’t band stallion material. He’ll be lucky to breed a few mares. So, now, unless Bistort wins another band, his line depends on previous foal crops. If they aren’t successful, in a decade it will be as if our family didn’t exist. I’ll keep having babies. Hopsage, too. It doesn’t matter. None of them will carry Bistort’s blood.”
Talus glanced over at Starwort. The colt tossed his forelock and the grulla realized that he had a unique facial marking. It was a white rosette resembling the plant that inspired his name. Its night-enhanced glow cheered the grulla in spite of Thistle’s tale.

“They’ll carry Fireweed’s blood,” Talus said. “He’ll give you strong foals, too.”

“I know. Especially after the river. But I still wish the time I spent with Bistort was preserved in my offspring. Every mare runs with many stallions across her lifespan. Some are good mates, some bad. Yet each union is important. Each leaves its mark on the mountain in the form of a unique colt or filly. When that mark is destroyed…it’s a tragedy by any measure. You’ll understand once you’re a mother.”

Talus looked away from Thistle, ashamed by her insensitivity. Of course one line couldn’t replace another. Spurge remained proud of her young by Finch even though she relished her position as Larkspur’s co-leader. How could she not? The buckskin had been part of her life, too.

“I’m sorry,” the yearling said.

“For what?” the blue roan asked. “Nobody expects a juvenile like you to grasp all the things a foal means to its dam.”

Talus’s ears swiveled in Starwort’s direction. The colt was telling Draba about his first encounter with a pronghorn. Hopsage gently corrected him whenever he embellished the story. The grulla wondered what memories, aspirations, and hopes the little mustang represented to his mother. Then she saw herself galloping through snow with Lupine in her wake.

“What did your son mean to you?” Talus said to Thistle.

Pain brightened the older mustang’s eyes, lingered for a moment, and dimmed to bittersweet joy. “Well,” Thistle said, “it’s hard to know where to begin. I guess he was the
fulfillment of my dream to produce a band stallion. Someone powerful enough to win many mares and keep my blood surging through the horses of Mount Mesteño long after I’m gone. Lupine had the speed and strength to do that. He was different from the instant he entered the world. Before he found his feet, he simply lay on his side in the middle of the clearing where I went into labor and studied everything around him with complete serenity. It was as if he was born aware of his own promise—and unafraid because of it.”

Thistle’s voice lifted with wonder. As Talus listened, she tried to imagine what it would be like to create a living being, to store it deep inside like a secret for over a year, to think of it as half-real, a kind of shadow life, only to expel something with muscles and bones and a mind. The thought mixed terror with elation.

“Of course, he was more than his potential,” Thistle continued. “You probably have bad memories of him, but he wasn’t always an unpleasant, competitive colt. He had a kind disposition until the band made a fuss over him. The attention gave him a high opinion of himself. It was my fault, really. I grew so proud of him that I ignored his bad behavior. Let his arrogance go unchecked. Ruined him.”

Talus pawed the ground uncomfortably—Thistle might have been talking about her instead of Lupine—but did not interrupt.

“I miss his gentle side the most now,” Thistle concluded. “When I think of him, I don’t picture him running or jumping or fighting or any of the other things that won him the admiration of our band. Instead, I see him grazing quietly at my side, perfectly content as long as there was grass underfoot and sky overhead and wind in his mane. Perfectly content as long as I was nearby to love him.”
Talus’s self-consciousness melted in the heat of Thistle’s sorrow. She wanted to tell the blue roan that Lupine was all right or would be in time, that a brave mustang like him could face even a life among humans with spirit. But as she turned to address the mare, she remembered Vetch and knew the theft of a foal cannot be tempered by anything less than its recovery. It would be disrespectful to suggest such a tragedy had a positive aspect.

Talus said the only thing she could say without betraying her conscience: “I’m sorry.”

Thistle said, “I know. I’m sorry for you, too. I heard the old chestnut broke down in front of you.”

“Yes. She saved me from an angry stallion and he kicked her in the leg.”

Talus’s eyes widened in the darkness. Penstemon had died so suddenly and horrifically that the grulla had not registered the heroism of her final moments. Now the young mustang relived the fear-maddened gray’s assault. She watched him lunge at her and Bitterroot with his ears pinned and his lips peeled. Watched Penstemon absorb the force of a blow meant for them with her age-thinned body. Grief brought Talus’s fatigue into sharp focus. She longed to sleep.

“Why don’t you lie on the ground?” Thistle asked. “It’ll be fine just this once.”

Talus peered at Fireweed, straining to make him out in the gloom. He and Aster were still talking, but both seemed alert. They would notice any danger before it reached the band. The yearling lowered herself to the wizened grass that carpeted the cirque. The hard soil bruised her ribs yet didn’t lessen her delight at resting off her feet. As she began to dream with Thistle standing next to her and Hopsage, Starwort, and Draba nearby, Talus forgot the climb into the sunset, her exchange of breath with Fireweed, the river, and the mountain lion. She was a newborn again, a small and helpless creature slumbering at the hooves of a mother who would never leave her.
In the morning, Aster led the horses on a tour of their new range. They climbed out of the cirque and traveled north to an alpine meadow that offered decent grazing, northwest to a rocky area below the summit of Mount Mesteño, where liquid snow would supply them with water, and southwest to an outcrop they could huddle under during storms. Finally they trotted southeast through a field of wildflowers on their way back to the cirque. The group paused in a stretch of paintbrush while Fireweed claimed the area with his spoor.

Talus and Draba observed the field side by side. The paintbrush, faded to the washed-out red of a female robin’s breast, undulated in a late summer breeze. Beyond the rusty swathe, violet sprays of larkspur mingled with butterfly-yellow ragwort flowers. Whenever the wind died, the air grew sweet with pollen and shivered with the muted thunder of bees.

“This part of the mountain isn’t as lush as our father’s land,” Draba said, pawing the gravely soil as if amazed it could support such color. “I miss the valley already.”

“I do, too. But I like the wildness of high places. Wasn’t it exhilarating to see the summit up close? I can’t wait to go there again,” Talus said.

“It is beautiful. Even so, I’d prefer a home with better grazing.”

“You’re so practical, Draba!”

“Level-headedness is a virtue,” Aster said. She had crept up behind the sisters and listened to their conversation.

Talus flinched with surprise. Not even Spurge could approach another horse without betraying herself with the chink of hoof on stone or the smell of grass crushed by a heavy step. How had the silver buckskin managed it?
“I know,” Talus said, shock turning to defensiveness. “I was only teasing her.”

Aster’s dark brown eyes settled on the grulla. They reminded the young mustang of a clear creek with a muddy bottom. Talus was afraid to look into them. She was more afraid to look away.

“Are you getting along with your new bandmates? I know it’s hard to make friends right after leaving your mothers,” the old mare said at last.

Talus rotated an ear toward Draba to gauge her reaction—the grulla suspected that Aster wanted to say something else entirely—but the dunalino seemed at ease with the situation.

“Oh, yes,” Draba said. “Hopsage and Thistle have been very kind. And I love Starwort. Being around him helps me cope with my separation from my little brother and sisters.”

“Well, Starwort appears quite taken with you as well. Hopsage told me he wouldn’t stop talking to you last night and he’s usually shy.”

“Really? I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“And what about you, Talus?” Aster asked. The silver buckskin’s gaze traveled down the grulla’s neck to the scar on her shoulder.

Talus changed position to hide the welt inflicted by her dam’s teeth and said, “I’m fine. I’m glad to be in this family.” She didn’t mention her initial disappointment at losing her status as the daughter of a lead mare. Yet the intensity of Aster’s interest—the elderly horse pushed both ears forward and dilated her nostrils—left Talus wondering if that was the true source of her leader’s curiosity.

Fireweed finished marking the band’s territory. He herded the mustangs into a group and whinnied to Aster. She glanced at Talus one last time, then jogged to the front of the party. As they followed the silver buckskin back to the cirque, Talus and Draba whispered to each other.
“Aster doesn’t strike you as strange or at least a bit eccentric?” Talus said.

“No! Why would you say that?” Draba cried.

“She’s too interested in me.”

“She spoke to me just as much. I know you’re used to attention, but—”

Fireweed, annoyed that the yearlings were lagging, nipped their hindquarters. They stopped arguing and trotted after their bandmates. The sun warmed the grulla, its rays seeping through her coat to her skin, but she felt a vague sense of discontent. Aster was keeping something from her. She had to find out what it was. Otherwise she would never be at ease in her new family.
The mystery was solved sooner and with less effort than Talus expected. Two days after their first circuit of their territory, the mustangs visited the meadow north of the cirque. As they grazed, Aster approached the grulla. To avoid attracting attention, the silver buckskin paused and picked at the grass every few steps. Talus recognized the ruse—she had often pretended to feed near Spurge when she wanted to listen in on an adult conversation—and gawked. It was bizarre to see such a venerable horse engaged in juvenile behavior. Yet the filly liked knowing that even Aster could look silly.

“I need to talk to you,” the old mare said when she reached Talus.

“I thought so,” the grulla said. “What is it?” She remembered how Aster had studied her shoulder and became nervous. Stress poured from her body and hovered above her like an acrid cloud.

“There’s no need to be agitated. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Do I seem like I’ve done something wrong? I’m just a little on edge. This meadow is more open than the ones I’m used to.”

Aster accepted the explanation without comment. Not far away, Starwort was galloping around Draba as fast as his brown stilt legs could carry him. She nickered to show she was impressed. To the left, Thistle and Hopsage nibbled each other’s itches. Fireweed watched them longingly. Thanks to the mares’ initial distrust and the yearlings’ immaturity, the red dun had missed his chance to breed. No foals would swell his family in the spring.

“Talus,” Aster said at length, “if all goes well, this band will outlive me.”
The young mustang’s ears snapped to attention. Panic zigzagged through her gut like a bolt of lightning. “You’re dying?” she asked.

“No. I’m in perfect health. But I’m coming to the end of my natural lifespan. I probably have a year or two left. When I’m gone, you’ll all be in trouble. Fireweed is strong, but inexperienced. He needs a superior lead mare to help him run the group. You could be that mare.”

The meadow changed in front of Talus. Individual blades of grass reared from what was once an undifferentiated sweep of green. Light pooled in the dips between the horses’ withers and backs, shining with the brilliance of still water. When a red-tailed hawk screamed somewhere overhead, its voice sounded as sharp and lucid as ice. Every plant, animal, and sensation on Mount Mesteño had been replaced by a keener version of itself.

“Why?” the grulla said when her adrenaline abated slightly.

“As a lead mare I’ve had very good luck. Every stallion and band I served taught me something different about life, love, and responsibility,” Aster said. “But I haven’t been fortunate when it comes to motherhood. All of my foals either died young or fell victim to the roundups.”

The grulla’s ears swiveled forward in surprise. She had assumed the silver buckskin’s blood coursed through many of the horses of Mount Mesteño. Melancholy checked her excitement as she stared at Aster’s strong, sensitive face. If the old mare’s offspring had inherited half of their dam’s power and intelligence, their loss was a tragedy of the highest order.

Aster went on, “I wasn’t just robbed of my loved ones. My legacy—the wisdom I imparted to my colts and fillies—vanished, too. Five years ago, before I met Bistort, the humans culled my entire family, including my daughter Phlox, the finest of my progeny. After I was released, I climbed to the top of the mountain. That’s how I found the cirque. And with the wind
in my mane and the land rolling below me, I vowed to teach a promising mustang the art of survival as I know it. Only then could I ensure I would live on in some form. Live on, and leave Mount Mesteño a little safer.”

Talus finally understood Aster’s sadness upon reaching their new home; the cirque reminded the silver buckskin of the low point of her life. The grulla’s admiration of her elder increased. Here was a horse who not only confronted past pain, but turned it to her advantage. Talus trembled with exhilaration as she pictured Aster surveying the alpine wilderness in bitter triumph, her family destroyed but her mind alight with hope.

“Since that day, I’ve made a habit of assessing each mustang I encounter in case she has the potential to be a truly great leader,” the mare continued. “You see, I can’t pass on my knowledge to someone unable or unwilling to use it to better the lot of her bandmates. In other words, I need a horse equally swift, smart, and noble. You showed those qualities last winter, when you outran Lupine and helped the bachelors knock down the pen. I decided if we ever ended up in the same family, I would choose you as my successor.”

Six months earlier, Talus would have reacted to Aster’s faith in her with delight. Now, in spite of her previous euphoria, doubt stirred in her gut. She was swift and smart, but was she noble? Nobody who had heard about her dash from cover would think so.

The grulla said, “I’m not as special as you think I am. Isn’t there another mustang you could train? Thistle’s fast and Draba’s the most selfless filly around.”

Aster’s gaze returned to the group. Starwort had exhausted himself at last; he lay on his side in the grass, his tiny barrel rising and falling as he caught his breath. Thistle, Hopsage, and Draba spoke quietly a few paces away. “I considered Thistle, but she’s a bit too old to learn
everything I have to teach. As for Draba…kindness, loyalty, and even courage can’t compensate for physical weakness. Not as long as the world is filled with danger.”

Talus lowered her head. She couldn’t look at Draba while Aster was dismissing the frail dunalino. It seemed deeply unfair that an innate gift like strength could determine a horse’s place on the mountain.

The silver buckskin glanced at Talus and, apparently sensing her mood, said, “I’m not saying your sister doesn’t have an equally important role to play. A band needs good mustangs as much as tough ones to succeed. After all, love holds us together even more than the security of herd life.”

The grulla nodded, but her doubt continued to swell. “Even so, I’m not up to the task. There are things you don’t know about me. Things you’d never guess.”

Aster studied Talus with a searching gleam in her eyes. “Like what?” she asked.

The filly snorted at the question. It was impossible to tell where to begin. Images of the terrible flight from the silver bird and the capture of her first family tumbled through her mind, a flurry of leaves in a cold wind. Bunchgrass rippled under her hooves as she charged from the aspens with the buzz of strange wings in her ears. Currant pushed aside Larkspur to reach Penstemon’s body, her outrage at the humans unleashed upon her own protector. Vetch called to her son, her voice thick with grief, her love expressed too late. Talus started to speak, but the pain of her memories winded her. She was not yet ready to share her mistake with the old mare.

“That isn’t important,” the grulla said at last. “I’m just not the horse you’ve been waiting for.”
“Talus, I can’t force you to do something you don’t want to do. Think about my offer and give me your decision in a few days. If you choose not to learn from me, we’ll pretend this conversation didn’t take place,” Aster said. Her expression was gentle yet sad.

The silver buckskin and the grulla joined their bandmates. Draba trotted over to her friend, her steps quick with concern.

“You seem worried,” she said.

Talus whispered, “Let’s talk later.” She had accepted that she couldn’t keep a secret from Draba and might as well get her advice on the matter.

In the afternoon, once the mustangs had returned to the cirque to drink at the tarn, Talus led Draba away from the others. They reclined amid the sandwort, their legs tucked beneath them in a deer-like posture.

“Well?” Draba said, her ears cocked expectantly.

Talus looked at Aster, who was drinking at the tarn, and said, “I found out why she’s been paying so much attention to me.”

“Not this again. I thought something really important had happened.” Draba began to rise.

“Wait! She offered to teach me all she knows about survival.”

The dunalino sank to the ground once more, peering at Talus from under her blonde forelock. “You’re being serious, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then…that’s quite an honor.”

Draba’s eyes glowed, but her coat smelled of sorrow. Talus wondered if her sister was jealous. The possibility sickened her. She didn’t want her success to be a family member’s pain.
“What’s the matter?” the grulla asked.

Draba said, “I’m happy for you. I am. Just don’t forget me.”

“Why would I forget you?”

“You’ve always admired Fireweed and Aster. Now one will be your mate and the other your mentor.”

Talus gazed at Draba in amazement. It had never occurred to her that new alliances could replace bonds forged in her youth. Fireweed filled her with desire and Aster inspired awe, but neither provided the quiet yet constant happiness she derived from her relationship with Draba. She couldn’t favor the red dun or the silver buckskin any more than she could prefer the exotic songs of migrants to the sweet chatter of the bushtits that made Mount Mesteño their home year-round.

“There will always be room for you in my heart,” Talus said. “Besides, I might not agree to learn from Aster.”

Draba lifted her head in disbelief. “What? Why would you pass up such an opportunity? You’ve always dreamed of becoming a lead mare. Aster can help you achieve your goals.”

“When we spoke in the meadow, she called me swift, smart, and noble. I’m not noble. I caused Penstemon’s death and Bitterroot’s capture. What if I don’t deserve to be trusted with Aster’s knowledge?”

“Talus, you are noble. A single mistake, regardless of the consequences, doesn’t determine your character.”

The grulla stared at her legs, at the black barring on her well-muscled forearms and the dark balls of her knees. It astonished her that those same legs folded harmlessly under her belly had carried her out of the aspens and into the path of the silver bird.
Talus said with a shudder, “My mistake was the result of arrogance.”

“But are you still arrogant?” Draba asked. “Or have you changed since the roundup? I say you’ve changed.”

“Not enough. I like to be respected. Recognized. Praised. That hasn’t gone away.”

“It doesn’t have to. Ambition isn’t wrong until it hurts others. Be aware of your limitations and you won’t misguide your band. And remember: the best way to honor Penstemon and Bitterroot is not to deny yourself a chance at happiness, but to put the lessons their tragedy taught you to good use.”

Talus weighed the self-doubt that had tormented her since the roundup against her desire to be a leader worthy of the blood of Spurge. At first her terror of endangering her second family just as she had endangered her first held sway. She pictured herself ascending to the position of lead mare under Aster’s tutelage only to make a choice that doomed Thistle or Hopsage or Starwort. Yet beneath that fear swam a more hopeful vision. It surged up through the depths of the filly’s distress and exploded into her consciousness. A grulla mustang galloped at the front of her band, her head high, her strides airy, her tail strung out behind her. Her past forgiven.

“All right,” Talus said, “I’ll accept Aster’s offer. But you have to tell me if I start acting full of myself.”

Draba said, “Depend upon it.”

The yearlings nuzzled, then Talus left to talk to Aster. High above the horses, a lone nighthawk appeared in the sky, alternately revolving and treading air. Its buzzy calls thrilled the young mustang, filling her with an acute, almost excruciating joy. The sensation amazed Talus. She didn’t know she could feel so much. It was as though she had grown another heart.
“You look happier than you were this morning,” Aster said when Talus approached her. The silver buckskin’s eyes sparkled with hope.

“I am,” the grulla said. “And I would be honored to learn from you. I’m not sure I can carry on your legacy, but I want to try.”

Relief flowed through Aster’s old body, sweeping the tension from her muscles. Talus thought of the eerie serenity of fish that have laid their eggs. But the mare regained her energy in a moment.

“I’m glad,” she said. “As for not carrying on my legacy, you might surprise yourself.”

“When do we start?”

“Soon. I have to speak with Fireweed. Your training may disrupt band life from time to time. This is not a natural arrangement—we will have to wander the mountain on our own for hours, even days.”

Talus gazed at Aster in wonder. Females only go off by themselves to foal. Otherwise they might fall victim to predators or rival stallions. If the silver buckskin was willing to break this most sacred of rules, what adventures lay ahead? The grulla’s world expanded as dramatically as it did on the day Spurge outsmarted the bachelors. In the months to come, there would be exploration, excitement, triumph, and peril. Talus couldn’t wait.

But as the sun rolled west and the nighthawks multiplied, the temperature dropped. The horses looked at the sky. In the mean glitter of the stars, they read the seasons: autumn was descending on Mount Mesteño. Even Talus, still ebullient, shuddered. She knew as well as the adults that fall contains winter as flesh contains bones. Hardship, it seemed, would also factor into the future.
The following morning, before the mustangs headed to the north meadow to graze, Fireweed approached Talus. Most of the bandmates were asleep, but the grulla had been roused by the sound of the wind skimming across the mouth of the cirque like a swallow over water. She heard the red dun coming and left Draba’s side to meet him.

“Can I talk to you?” Fireweed asked.

Talus pricked her ears in assent. The horses walked to the tarn to speak.

“Is this about Aster?” the filly said. “Did she tell you her plans for me?”

Fireweed said, “Yes. I wasn’t pleased at first. It isn’t natural for a stallion to let his mares wander.”

“What changed your mind?”

“Aster convinced me that you’d be safe in her care since there aren’t any other bands in the area. She also thinks Thistle will do just fine as her substitute while you two are away. That was crucial. I wouldn’t feel comfortable losing Aster for even an hour if we didn’t have a strong second-in-command.”

Talus agreed that Thistle would be a capable deputy. The blue roan was as stalwart as mustangs come. But the grulla wanted to return to Fireweed’s earlier comment. Though she hated being perceived as “in the care” of someone, her breath shortened at the revelation that the red dun had been worried about her.

“I’m happy to have your blessing,” Talus said, adding, in a coy tone, “and flattered that you’re looking out for me.”
Fireweed regarded the yearling with a sober expression. “Do you remember our last interaction in the sagebrush scrub?” he said after a long pause.

Talus recalled that Fireweed had turned to address her before departing with Rimrock and Greasewood. “Of course. I could never forget anything about you,” she said quietly.

It was true. The gallant young stallion had secured a prominent place in her consciousness from the moment she saw him fight Larkspur in the basin. Sometimes, when she closed her eyes, he appeared, confronting her father with his neck arched, his tail raised, and his coat veined silk. Over a year had passed, yet the image was as embedded in her mind as a fossil in stone.

Fireweed’s intense expression softened at Talus’s statement. For a moment, he seemed both shy and emboldened. “I looked back because I was going to promise to steal you once you were older. Even then, I knew you had the courage and spirit of a leader, that you would grow into a mare every stallion on the mountain would long to see running at the front of his band. I only stayed silent to avoid offending your sire. Later, I regretted that silence. During the roundup, as Rimrock, Greasewood, and I were being driven into the pen, I suddenly wished I had told you how I felt.”

Talus relived Fireweed’s incredible jump to freedom. She had always imagined that his love of some wild thing, of the mint-and-earth smell of sagebrush or the hush of a turkey vulture’s wings or the luster of first snow, had lifted him over the fence. Now she wondered if his desire for a future with her had also played a role.

“Oh, Fireweed,” she said, trembling with emotion, “I always hoped we would be mates, too.”
The grulla and the red dun nuzzled, then stood with their noses close together, breathing in each other’s scents. Talus liked the odor produced when her grass-like smell mingled with Fireweed’s earthy one. Perhaps their foals would inherit that combination much as Woodrush bore the olfactory stamp of both Spurge and Larkspur. Though the mutable nature of mustang society makes it difficult for mares to become attached to their stallions, in that moment Talus loved Fireweed.

The horses withdrew. Starwort had woken up. Soon he would prod Hopsage, too eager to nurse to wait for the sunlight to rouse her.

“Well, I just wanted to let you know I think Aster chose her successor wisely,” Fireweed said. “Train hard and, maybe, when you’re ready to lead the band, we’ll be as good a team as your parents.”

Talus stared at Fireweed without seeing him, her sight taken over by a daydream. A grulla guided her family to safety, her sure hooves barely touching the ground. Meanwhile a red dun covered the group’s retreat with pinned ears and bared teeth. The two horses moved like different parts of the same animal, their functions distinct but their goals identical.

When Fireweed trotted off to confer with Aster about where to take the band that day, Talus said to herself, “Maybe we’ll be better.”
BOOK III
“All right, Talus, why do you think we’re here? What can you learn from this place?” Aster said, her voice almost lost in the fierce wind rolling off the summit.

The grulla looked around, struggling to keep her eyes open as the frigid wind rushed past like an invisible avalanche. Teacher and student stood at the base of a rock wall below the top of Mount Mesteño. The view to the south was spectacular—the cirque, its tarn the blue-green of a magpie’s tail, lay far beneath them—but Talus didn’t grasp the significance of the location.

“I don’t know,” she cried, worried that she was going to fail her first test.

“Do you hear or smell anything?”

“No! How could I in this gale?”

“Then we have work to do. Even in these conditions, I can tell where the bighorn sheep have gone and which snowbanks are re-forming as the mountain grows colder and whether the fescue in the north meadow has died.”

Talus searched Aster’s face for signs of amusement to no avail. The silver buckskin was being serious. Yet the grulla had been considered astute in her natal band. It didn’t make sense that anyone could take in so much more than her.

Talus said, “But I’ve always been as good at interpreting the mountain as everyone else.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re good at interpreting the mountain,” Aster said, the wind reducing her forelock to a charcoal tangle. “Most horses—especially mares, who don’t need to be constantly alert like stallions—only check their surroundings for immediate threats. Yet greater attentiveness allows a band to avoid danger altogether. For instance, you and Draba escaped the mountain lion because you spotted it the instant it came within striking range, but
you wouldn’t have been in a bad situation if you had noticed the silence of the area and chosen a different resting site.”

“Why should silence have alarmed me?” Talus recalled the night Draba almost joined up with Bistort. The open country around the juniper thicket had been quiet except for the odd bird call.

“Because silence means the elk, deer, and pronghorns are wary. They lose their young and their weak to lions more than we do, so they know the cats’ favorite hunting grounds.”

The grulla lowered her head. Aster’s age and wisdom humbled her. Compared to the old mare, she was as ignorant of the nuances of Mount Mesteño as a baby bird lying blind in its nest.

Aster must have sensed Talus’s shame. The silver buckskin said quickly, “I just picked the first example that came to mind. The point is, a leader can save herself and her bandmates a lot of trouble by learning to hear, smell, and feel Mount Mesteño while also attaching the proper meaning to every sensation she encounters.”

“How do I do that?” Talus asked.

“Through concentration and practice,” Aster said. “You might as well start now. Close your eyes, then extend your other senses. Reach out into the wilderness with your ears, nose, and even body.”

Talus followed the old mare’s command. Robbed of her sight, the filly could only track the wind dropping from the summit, a spectral waterfall. It swept past her with such violence that it blotted out all rival experiences.

The grulla cried, “It’s no use! I can’t hear or smell or feel anything but air!”

“You’re not focusing. Clear your head and try again,” Aster said.
Talus snorted, but obeyed. She pricked her ears, opened her nostrils, and adjusted the set of her feet. Gradually the wind relaxed its tyranny. Vague noises, scents, and tremors welled beneath the gale. The grulla’s temples and throat pulsed with excitement.

“It’s working!” the young mustang said, turning her face toward Aster without peering at her surroundings. “Except I can’t tell what I’m picking up yet.”

“Don’t talk. The answers will come,” the silver buckskin said, half-stern, half-encouraging.

The grulla brought her mind to a point. It punctured her forehead and flowed out into the world seeking knowledge. Though blowing as fiercely as ever, the wind faded to a distant thunder. Talus had almost reached another level of awareness. She was sure of it. In a few more seconds, she would be there, every nerve buzzing.

The muscles along Talus’s neck and between her shoulders bunched with effort. Just when the young mustang thought she couldn’t bear the strain an instant longer, Mount Mesteño revealed its secrets. A faint ringing sound sharpened into the beat of cloven hooves on stone. Bighorn sheep were climbing a precipice thirty meters above the horses, probably on their way to a mineral deposit. Meanwhile an odor too neutral to register a minute before took on both the sweetness of cold and the stoutness of soil. Ice had indeed begun to silver the muddy remains of thawed snowbanks. When an unusually strong vibration surged from her fetlocks to her knees, Talus realized there were elk in a small field to the east. Their steps made the earth shudder because the fescue that used to soften the impact of their heavy feet had withered.

“Oh, Aster,” the grulla exclaimed, “I sense everything you sensed—the sheep and the snow and the dead fescue!”

The mare said, “Look at me then.”
Talus blinked. Aster stood in front of her, mane askew, brown eyes alight with vicarious


triumph.

“Well done,” the elderly horse said.

The yearling deep-breathed to center herself after so much mental activity. “Is it always
draining?” she asked.

“No. If you do this regularly, one day you’ll be able to decipher the mountain with ease.
Your ears will swivel in the direction of a far-off noise before you’ve told them to and your nose
will tingle automatically every time the wind shifts. You’ll be alert without even knowing you
are.”

“I can’t wait!”

“Well, that’s my point—you’ll have to wait. To wait and work hard. Every skill worth
having requires patience.”

Talus glanced at Aster to show she understood. But as the mustangs turned their backs on
the summit, the rock wall, and the wind to gaze down at their home range, the grulla’s chest
expanded with longing. Every glen, meadow, and basin on Mount Mesteño hummed with life.
Every life hummed with information. Talus craved access to that wisdom with an elemental
hunger not unlike her desire to run or eat or drink. If she could have skipped ahead to a future in
which she had already mastered her lessons, she would have done so without a second thought.
Instead, the filly followed Aster back to the cirque, a new determination forming within her. The
talents—speed and strength—that made her a potential leader had been given to her by her
parents. Knowledge, it appeared, called for sustained effort. Finally, Talus could put her
obstinacy to good use.
Autumn brought color and then starkness to the mountain. The few deciduous trees that grew in the alpine zone went as red as the mane of a strawberry roan only to drop their leaves in a brittle gray shower weeks later. The coats of the mule deer donned the chocolate sheen of the rut before fading to the color of gravel once the stags and does had separated. Even the high, stony places fit the pattern; the sunflowers that pushed their way through scree in the shadow of the summit glowed yellow on the cusp of death.

Talus was more aware of such seasonal changes than ever as a result of her dedicated training. Since her first lesson, she had taken advantage of every opportunity to hone her senses, challenging herself to remain alert long after her bandmates relaxed. Now she could tell the difference between the footsteps of hunting and tranquil predators. Could separate the wingbeats of a dove from those of a robin over the roar of windstruck foliage. The grulla still had to concentrate to attain the extreme sensitivity she had experienced with Aster’s guidance, but the strain decreased each day.

One morning the silver buckskin approached Talus to ready her for their next adventure. The horses were grazing in the north meadow without much enjoyment—frost had killed the most tender grass, forcing them to pick at the coarse vegetation they had ignored in the warmer months. As usual, the grulla browsed at Draba’s side.

Aster greeted the sisters and said, “I see you two are learning that winter comes early in the upper elevations.”

“Yes,” Draba said, pawing the chilled ground in search of a decent meal, “and we don’t like it. When will you take us lower?”
“Soon. First Talus and I have to go on a short trip.”

Aster invited the grulla to walk with her with a toss of her charcoal forelock. The filly looked at Draba apologetically. While pleased that her sibling had accepted the lead mare’s offer, the dunalino didn’t want Talus to leave the safety of the band.

The yearling caught up to the old mare. “Where are we going? When are we leaving? How long will we—”

“Slow down,” Aster said. “I don’t want you to overexcite yourself. A good leader must be poised as well as brave.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just eager to see more of Mount Mesteño.”

You will. Now that you’ve sharpened your senses, I want to give you a tour of the mountain. It’s time for you to learn how to use each habitat you encounter to your advantage. We’ll set off tomorrow at dawn and be gone for five days.”

Talus glanced over her shoulder at the rest of the band. Fireweed had approached Draba, perhaps to comfort her. The grulla’s throat closed at the sight of the bold young stallion and the pretty dunalino. “Are you sure they’ll be all right without you?”

Aster nuzzled Talus reassuringly. “I wouldn’t leave them if I wasn’t. Thistle is perfectly capable of filling in for me and Fireweed has become an excellent protector since the summer. You don’t have to worry about anything but your training.”

Talus accepted the silver buckskin’s reasoning but doubt continued to swell in her. That night, as she rested between Draba and Thistle, the filly started to tremble. She realized that she was more afraid for herself than her bandmates. The realization shocked her in light of the exhilaration she had experienced when Aster first told her they would have to go off on their
own once in a while. It seemed the unnaturalness of voluntarily forsaking the group had at last rattled her.

The morning dawned cold and clear. Aster and Talus climbed the eastern wall of the cirque, crabstepped through the bed of rocks on the opposite side, and began their journey. As the sun rose, sending their shadows sprawling out behind them, the grulla’s anxiety faded a little. Yet she still felt profoundly uncomfortable. Part of her longed to press up against the old mare like a foal drawing comfort from the heat of her dam’s side. The other half insisted that she remain self-possessed.

“Where are we heading?” Talus asked in as nonchalant a voice as she could muster.

Aster, her withers reddened by the newborn day, turned one brown eye on the filly. “To a place I call Aspen Row. You’ll understand why when we get there.”

Talus’s ears flickered. “Is Aspen Row near the groves in my father’s territory?”

“No. It’s north of Bistort’s range. We’re not going to trespass on anyone’s land if we can help it.”

Talus hid her disappointment. She would have loved to glimpse Spurge’s sleek black form from a distance or smell Woodrush’s snowmelt odor on the wind. But Aster was right. It would be unwise to go somewhere occupied by another band. Even after the summer breeding season, few stallions are above stealing unattended females.

“How far is Aspen Row?” Talus said, her nerves getting the better of her.

“Not far. We’ll reach it by noon,” Aster said. She paused and stared at the yearling’s lashing tail. “What’s the matter?”

Though Talus had always been reluctant to share her emotions with Spurge, she wanted, suddenly, to confide in Aster. The silver buckskin’s face, with its wide-set eyes and long,
thoughtful muzzle, was too open to receive a lie. Too open, and too shrewd. Once again, the grulla found herself wondering what the old mare’s foals could have achieved had they remained on the mountain. For a moment, their ghosts seemed to hover about the young mustang, demanding to know why she deserved their mother’s wisdom.

At last Talus said, “I’m scared. I thought I was excited, but I’m scared.”

Aster’s ears snapped upright so swiftly their hooked tips almost touched. “You speak as if you’re ashamed,” the silver buckskin said in surprise.

“Shouldn’t I be?”

“No. Only cowards walk without fear.”

Talus shook her head in a half-hearted attempt to free her mind of Aster’s conundrum. “That doesn’t make sense,” she cried.

“Really? Haven’t you noticed that those who never spook are the least prepared when danger comes? Even worse than the panicky types?”

The yearling mulled this over. She, not the highstrung Currant, had exploded into the path of the bird with strange wings. But arrogance rather than fright had fueled her ill-fated dash from the trees. Unless pride was a form of terror…

The horses pressed on, traveling due east and then southeast. Eventually the wild, stony land they considered home mellowed to forested country reminiscent of the northern border of Larkspur’s range. Stands of aspens, leafless yet vital in the light of the now risen sun, appeared with increasing regularity.

The non-equine residents of Mount Mesteño did, too. Robins gathered in large, cold weather flocks, their smooth heads retracted into their downy breasts. A lone black bear gorged
on serviceberry fruit only beginning to lose its summer sweetness. Occasionally a rabbit, disturbed by the mustangs’ hoofbeats, stood on its hind legs and clucked.

Talus was just starting to master her unease, not by ignoring it, but by using it to hone her senses to a fine edge, when Aster paused. The grulla peered around the old mare and saw what had to be Aspen Row. A long line of trees barred the way, white bark bright as salt compared to the browning foliage on the ground. Talus dilated her nostrils, taking in the damp musk of rotting plant matter. She glanced at Aster quizzically. The Row’s growth pattern was slightly unusual—not many groves were extensive yet slender—but nothing else arrested her attention.

Aster said, “I know it doesn’t look like much, but let me show you why I brought you here.”

The silver buckskin entered the trees with her usual grace. Yet though she set down her hooves as precisely as a deer, the leaf litter crackled beneath her. Talus lifted her head and tail. She had expected silence from a mare of Aster’s carefulness. The grulla’s confusion deepened.

“You’re normally so quiet!” she gasped.

The old mustang, weaving in and out of the living column, said, “Yes, but in the fall no horse can navigate an aspen grove without alerting others to her presence. It’s different in the spring, when the sound of the wind in the new growth drowns out all movement.”

Talus stepped forward and sniffed the spade-shaped leaves scattered across the dirt. Their pungent odor made her nostrils smart. She snorted to clear her sinuses and the mulch fluttered in the tempest of her breath. It seemed strange that something so flimsy could shield animals in one season and betray them in another.

“I never noticed that. Not consciously anyway,” Talus said.
“Of course you didn’t. Most mustangs only pay attention to the parts of the mountain that offer them food and water. But a great leader must understand every environment she comes across as well as she understands herself. Its benefits—and hazards—may determine the fate of her band. Now, follow me and learn from these trees yourself.”

The two horses moved up and down the Row. Talus saw that the fallen leaves announced her no matter how lightly she stepped. A doe relieving a low branch of its twigs bounded away as if the mustangs were dangerous. An elk peeling bark from a sapling paused at the commotion and lowered his magnificent antlers. Several times a ruffed grouse burst into flight, its brown, gray, and fawn plumage creating the illusion that the earth had come unmoored.

“Well, what do you think?” Aster said, an ear swiveling backward to catch Talus’s reply.

The grulla said, “I think it’s good deer, elk, and grouse don’t eat horses. Any predator in or near this grove could tell exactly where we are.”

“Good. Remember, then, that aspens work for you in the warm months and against you in the cold.”

Talus nickered her assent, her heart beating faster. Mount Mesteño looked very different viewed through the lens of Aster’s teachings. Once meaningless habitats thrummed with security and peril, repose and terror, stillness and activity.

Over the following days, Aster and Talus visited every type of terrain on the mountain. After leaving the Row, they headed downhill into an expansive juniper belt. There the silver buckskin showed her charge that the hardy evergreens covered most scents with their spicy odor, making it hard for predators to locate their victims. Yet the trees’ short stature and staggered thickets made large animals such as horses visible from a distance. Nor was the dry, gravelly soil
at their roots the best surface to run across at high speed—a lesson Talus already knew thanks to the death of Penstemon’s son.

The scrubland, too, both protected and endangered wildlife. Mustangs could traverse the level earth at a quick pace. However, the sagebrush and greasewood were not big enough to hide anything but a rabbit. A horse fleeing an enemy faster than she was would do well to avoid the place altogether.

The clay barrens posed the same problem. In fact, Talus, overcome by bitter memories of the roundup, vowed to hate all aspects of the place. She was forced to break her promise within a few hours of wandering the area with Aster. Softened by rain, the sun-stiffened dirt crumbled, muting the mustangs’ footsteps without sending up conspicuous dirt clouds. And, once in a while, a seep provided an unexpected drink and mud bath. It appeared no part of Mount Mesteño lacked complexity. As with the mustangs, who each sported a unique combination of faults and virtues, every habitat could be useful—or deadly—under the right circumstances.

By the time Aster set a course for the cirque, Talus’s relationship with the land had changed forever. It was not the friend she had considered it before the loss of Penstemon and Bitterroot. It was not the cold, indifferent thing that had ignored her suffering on the way back from the pen, either. It was simply an organism. A large one comprised of many lives it could shed and replace as easily as hair or baby teeth, but an organism nonetheless. Like other organisms, it could inspire fear, serenity, repulsion, and love. Like other organisms, knowing it well would diminish its threats and amplify its beauties. Talus found the idea liberating. During the long walk home, she imagined that the grass, leaves, bare ground, and stone beneath her hooves made up the coat of a great beast.
The silver buckskin and the grulla returned to their territory at sunset on the fifth day. They climbed to the lip of the cirque and gazed down on their bandmates for a moment. Hopsage nursed Starwort, who milked his tail happily as he fed. Thistle dragged her incisors along Draba’s spine, scratching an itch the dunalino couldn’t reach. Fireweed drank from the tarn. A sudden, sharp pity winded Talus. Her companions’ worlds hadn’t altered in the slightest, yet hers had never been richer.

Aster whinnied and plunged into the cirque. Talus trotted after her. As the rest of the mustangs neighed in greeting, the grulla tried to shake off her melancholy. But an icy wind was blowing. Winter had arrived.
The first snow of the season had not yet fallen, but it already existed in a spectral form. Like a reverse ghost, it announced its coming, crisping the air, icing the grass, and banishing the migratory birds. Talus felt it in her marrow as a kind of cold urgency. She knew it was time to take refuge in the lower flanks of Mount Mesteño as she had during the previous winter, when Spurge led the band to the spring in the sagebrush scrub.

Aster knew it, too. The old mare roused the mustangs at dawn a few days after she and Talus returned to the cirque. Her serious demeanor spoke for itself. The others followed her downhill without a word. They would not see their home range again for a season.

Talus would miss the rocky, lonely land that had taught her so much over the past months, but she was eager to be off. So eager that she forgot her place and sprang past Thistle. The blue roan flattened her ears, checking the filly with a single gesture. No yearling, not even Aster’s protégé, would be permitted to run at the head of the group.

“Watch yourself,” Draba said as Talus joined her toward the rear of the little phalanx of horses. “Even with your training, you won’t surpass your elders for quite a while.”

The grulla looked at her sister gratefully—the dunalino had kept her promise to point out arrogant behavior—and said, “I’m just glad to be on the move.”

“You realize we’re not going to the same part of the sagebrush scrub that your mother favors, right? If we were, we’d be traveling southeast, not due south.”

Talus glanced to the left. The rising sun was as far away as it had been at the start of their journey. Its muted orange rays, fanning out across the scree-studded clearing through which they were passing, barely reached them. Irritated by her own lack of perception, the young mustang
whipped her tail back and forth. Yet the recognition that she would not have the opportunity to interact with her dam hurt more. Would her attachment to Spurge ever wane? Perhaps only once she had fulfilled the beautiful black’s expectations…

“Of course I realize that,” Talus lied. “And I don’t care, either. I’ve outgrown our last family. This one is all I need.”

Draba tossed her near-white forelock and fixed the grulla with a single liquid eye. “Well, I often think of Milfoil. And Larkspur. And Currant. All of them, really.”

“Except for Vetch.”

Draba shied as if a snake had coursed across her path. The odd reaction broadcast guilt. Talus propped and stared at her sibling until Fireweed nickered.

“Don’t tarry,” the red dun said. “We’ve got to beat the snow to the bottom of the mountain.”

Talus caught up to Draba. She whispered, “What’s wrong with you? Have you spotted Vetch?”

The dunalino said evasively, “There’s the river! I hope we don’t have to ford it. I’m in no mood for a wet coat!”

Talus lifted her gaze and noticed a blue line shimmering several miles ahead of them. The thought of swimming made her shiver. But she couldn’t let Draba distract her.

“Never mind the river. Tell me the truth.”

“Oh, all right. I smelled her a week ago. You and Aster weren’t back yet.”

“Where did you pick up the scent?”

“West of the cirque, at the outer limits of our territory.”
Fear eked from Talus’s coat, causing Hopsage to glance back at the yearlings and scan the land for danger. The grulla clacked her teeth apologetically to convince her bandmate that she had been startled by a shadow. But even as she struggled to master herself, memories of the brown mare reared into her consciousness like a wrathful stallion. Vetch charged across the valley in Larkspur’s range, her eyes glittering with hatred as she bore down upon Talus. Vetch challenged Spurge, heavy with Woodrush, to a fight that could only have one outcome. Vetch gazed at the band she had watched grow with the intensity of the betrayed before galloping out of sight. Her expression was a promise of revenge. Of wrongs righted with blood.

“Why would she pass so close to our borders?” Talus asked, her voice going up a pitch.

Draba said, “Coincidence, probably. How would she know who you run with now? I wouldn’t worry if I were you. Even if our paths cross, she wouldn’t dare attack with Aster and Fireweed around.”

The grulla agreed, but pictured Vetch preparing to strike, her muscles hardening beneath her mud-colored coat, her legs shaking with excitement. Not even rawboned Thistle carried as much power in her body.

“Was she with anybody?”

“No. I just smelled her. She must have sworn off herd life after Larkspur banished her.”

As the mustangs approached the river, trotting out of wind-stunted alpine vegetation into relatively lush country, Talus’s panic took on a note of wonder. If Draba was right, Vetch had walked a strange path since the spring. Horses dread loneliness as much as death. More than death, for at least mortality is shared and therefore communal. To wander the mountain without familiar hoofbeats in one’s ears and familiar scents in one’s nostrils by choice instead of
tragedy…Talus could barely grasp the idea. In spite of her dislike of Vetch, the filly wished her former bandmate had not been reduced to such an unnatural existence.

“What do you think she does when she meets a stallion?” the grulla said. “Surely no mare would fight a male who claimed her for his family even if she were desperate to be alone.”

“She must take great care to avoid other mustangs. But that may change if she wants to survive the winter. She’ll be forced to relocate to the lower elevations with the rest of us and then some band is bound to spot her,” Draba said.

The sisters forgot Fireweed was behind them and raised their voices. He immediately thrust his ears forward to listen to their conversation.

“Who are you talking about?” the red dun said. “You seem scared of her, whoever she is.”

The fillies looked from the stallion to each other. They couldn’t explain why Vetch made them nervous without mentioning Talus’s dash from the trees. Not unless they chose their words with care.

Draba said at last, “Do you remember the big brown mare who used to run with our parents?”

“Yes,” Fireweed said. “I hear she has a bad temper.”

“She does. And she hates Spurge and Talus. Anyway, she runs alone now and we’re worried she’ll make trouble if we see her in the scrubland.”

Fireweed dropped his head to herd the fillies after their bandmates but continued the discussion. “Why would anyone hate Spurge or her offspring?”

Anxiety quickened Talus’s pace. Draba had been doing well so far, but she wasn’t a good liar. Or at least she didn’t lie often.
The dunalino, pointing an ear backward to acknowledge Fireweed without breaking stride, said, “Vetch—the brown mare—is jealous of Spurge’s superior speed and beauty. She dislikes Talus by association.”

A few seconds passed while Fireweed considered Draba’s explanation. Finally, he said, “If this Vetch ever tries to hurt you two or even to approach our family, I’ll drive her off as if she were a foal-hungry mountain lion. Nobody crosses my plucky Talus and gentle Draba.”

The grulla slowed to a measured trot and nuzzled her sister in gratitude. At that moment, Aster brought the group to a halt. In front of the mustangs flowed the river. Starwort began to quiver and release the stink of fear.

“Do I have to go in?” the colt asked his mother.

Hopsage was about to reply when Draba said, “Starwort, you’ve grown big and powerful since the summer. Will you help me to the other side?”

The tiny stallion went calm. He tossed his forelock, inflated his barrel, and raised his tail. Talus tried not to snort.

“It appears I have a challenger for Draba’s affections,” Fireweed said to the grulla. “I’ll overlook it for now, but if he comes near you…”

Talus pretended to be annoyed by the joke, tensing her leg muscles to warn the red dun that she was not above a swift kick. Secretly she welcomed his flirtations. Their relationship had become increasingly playful in the weeks following their talk in the cirque.

“All right,” Aster said, “the sooner we get this over with, the better. There’s some driftwood upriver slowing down the current so we won’t be in any danger. Nevertheless, use caution.”
The silver buckskin waded into the river without glancing over her shoulder to confirm that her bandmates were behind her. She didn’t need to, for the horses trusted her judgment and one another. Thistle plunged after Aster, her thick blue frame creating a wake. Hopsage, Starwort, and Draba splashed in next. The foal watched his “charge” anxiously, never realizing that the bay mare and the dunalino yearling were flanking him. Talus entered the water last with Fireweed at her hip.

The river, cold but quieted by the obstruction, posed no problem for the mustangs until they scrambled out dripping. A frigid wind, gathering strength as it rolled from the summit of Mount Mesteño to the lower elevations, struck the wet animals with coat-chilling force. Talus felt the hair on her withers stiffen and turn to ice. Fireweed pressed his hot tongue against the area.

Aster, her white hide plastered against her black skin, said, “The cold front is gaining on us. Come. We must move quickly now.”

The horses set off at a canter. As sensation flowed back into her river-numbed legs, Talus thought of Vetch. Though her fears had been allayed by Fireweed’s vow to protect her, the grulla still felt an intense dread. The brown mare was out there. Where exactly, no one could say. But Talus knew for certain that her old enemy’s heart stung with rage. It would until it stopped beating.

Afternoon had mellowed the sunlight but not the wind by the time the band arrived at its winter home. Talus gazed about uncertainly. Like Spurge’s rough weather retreat, the new base was a swathe of sagebrush scrub. However, no spring offered the mustangs a convenient source of water and the grass interspersed with the shrubbery appeared thin. Draba, standing next to
Talus, bobbed her head in a clear display of agitation. Hopsage, too, seemed upset. She sampled the threadbare forage and glanced at Starwort with concern fogging her dark eyes.

Aster studied her family and said, “This place may not look promising, but it provides better protection from snowstorms than most parts of the scrubland. That ledge slows blizzards approaching from the north.”

Talus followed the silver buckskin’s gaze to an unusually steep drop-off between the juniper-dominated middle elevations and the sagebrush-riddled foothills. She hoped the elderly mare was right, then scolded herself for doubting her teacher. Aster never made mistakes. Talus would not have been surprised if the pale horse with the charcoal points had skipped her foalhood. Had been born wise, even a little gray around the muzzle. With Vetch nearby and hardship on the way, the young mustang was glad to have Aster on her side.
CHAPTER 34

For all its bluster, the snow arrived in gentle flurries. One evening Talus peered at the sky and saw sunstruck dust motes falling through the air. She didn’t grasp what was really happening until the particles melted into her coat.

“Well, I expected worse,” Talus said, watching the pitiful flakes lend the scrub a momentary sparkle. “At this rate, the mountain won’t be covered for another month.”

Thistle, grazing not far from the grulla, grumbled, “Yearlings. They survive one winter and think they’re experts on the season.” The blue roan had been surly for a few days, but Talus didn’t mind because she knew her bandmate missed Lupine. A year ago, the handsome colt had galloped through a similar stretch of sagebrush, oblivious of the coming roundup.

“Don’t pay her any attention when she’s in a bad mood,” Hopsage said, walking over with Draba and Starwort. Thistle turned her rump to her friend. “You are wrong, though. A bigger storm is on the way. I can smell moisture in the clouds.”

Talus flared her nostrils but didn’t detect the heavy scent of water. The older horse’s observational skills humbled the filly. Experience was the only teacher better than Aster.

As if on cue, the silver buckskin trotted over. Her steps were light and purposeful. Talus knew why. Another lesson awaited. The grulla pricked her ears and ran to meet her mentor.

“Where are we going?” she asked, quivering with excitement.

Aster said, “You’ll see. Just be patient—this may be our most important outing yet. Let me tell Thistle where to take the band today and then we’ll be off.”

Talus watched the old mare speaking to her deputy while the rest of the horses listened. Draba pawed the earth and glanced at Fireweed as if hoping he would put a stop to her sister’s
latest dangerous excursion. The grulla looked away, troubled. Though the fillies had remained close even as Talus spent more and more time with Aster, they no longer shared every aspect of their lives with each other. Spurge’s daughter could not talk of her training without stirring up anxiety. Milfoil’s could not make the pleasant but uneventful hours she spent under Thistle’s temporary rule sound interesting in comparison. It bothered Talus to think that her existence now intersected rather than overlapped the dunalino’s. But she supposed all relationships changed.

Aster collected Talus and the two trotted south, descending from the sagebrush scrub into the clay barrens. The snow continued to fall, its touch so light the young mustang imagined tiny creatures with cold feet were alighting on her back. Gradually the land whitened and shimmered. When a herd of pronghorns crossed the barrens, passing in front of the horses, hoof-tossed flakes swirled into the air like dust. The grulla inhaled, savoring the way the hot, brushy odor of the ruminants mingled with the sharp yet neutral aroma of frost.

“Hopsage told me a serious storm is coming,” Talus said as she and Aster wove through a maze of greasewood. A rabbit sprang from the brittle vegetation, orange light veining the lining of its ears.

“She’s right,” the silver buckskin said. “That’s why we had to leave so suddenly. I want to show you something before the snow gets too deep to travel through.”

“Show me what?”

“Again, you’ll see. Just remember that I would never lead you into harm.”

Aster turned west and increased the pace. Talus followed, her breath clipped by adrenaline. The old mare hadn’t told the grulla to trust her during their previous adventures. Did a particularly difficult challenge lay ahead? Talus bucked and kicked, energized and overjoyed by the chance to prove herself. Since her last journey with Aster, the yearling had learned to
welcome tests of courage. Fear, she found, had a strange appeal. It made her nerves crackle like burning branches.

Eventually the greasewood disappeared, replaced by a vast swathe of clay. The pale brown earth, not yet softened by melting snow, still had the cobwebbed appearance of dirt baked to its breaking point. In the evening light, the cracks in the soil filled with darkness, turning the ground into a network of black lines. Talus set down her hooves carefully to avoid wrenching an ankle. She had never encountered such fractured country before. Aster, however, was on intimate terms with this corner of the barrens. The old mare glided across the ruptured land as if she were crossing an alpine meadow.

At last the mustangs reached their destination: a large square made of wood. Talus pricked her ears and peered at the structure. It reminded her of a beaver’s den. But there was no water nearby and the surface of the dwelling looked too smooth to be constructed of mud and branches.

“What kind of animal lives there?” Talus asked.

“One you already know well,” Aster said. “Have you forgotten how to use your nose?”

The grulla spread her nostrils. A terrible smell—the stench of hairless flesh—sent her whirling toward the mountain. Aster leaped in the way, forcing Talus to pull up.

“What are you doing? Move!” the yearling cried. For a moment she hated the silver buckskin.

Aster, meeting Talus’s attempts to push past her with a heavy shoulder, said, “Remember what I told you. We’re perfectly safe.”

“Safe? Near a human den? You’ve lost your mind! Step aside or I’ll bite you.”

“Not if I bite you first.”
Talus immediately stopped arguing. Like Spurge, Aster seldom resorted to force to discipline her bandmates. Even the threat of a nip was shocking.

“This human will not hurt us,” the old mare said. “Now come with me.”

She walked to the right of the strange den, tucked her legs beneath her, and settled into a resting position. Talus followed but remained standing. As the sun sank in the west, piling pink and then purple on the horizon, the creatures of the low places commenced their pre-dusk frenzy. Jackrabbits sat up with their slender forearms pressed to their breasts and their round-tipped ears at attention. A lone coyote hunted gophers, its granite-and-rust body arching as it jumped into the air and descended on its prey. Turkey vultures toured the sky on broken-feathered wings.

Talus cocked her head to stare at Aster. The silver buckskin quivered with anticipation. Snow had gathered on her withers, but she either didn’t notice or didn’t care. Even stranger, an expression of wonder spread across her face, softening her muzzle and warming her eyes. Her entire being said, “Soon. Soon.”

Just as the sunset reached its liquid zenith, a rectangular portion of the den swung forward. Yellow light fanned out across the snow-dusted clay. An instant later, a female human emerged, her stink almost physical in the clean winter air. Talus started to shake, convulsions rippling from her chest to the delicate skin on her belly to her haunches. She heard Aster rise and draw a shallow, excited breath. Rage gorged the filly’s heart with blood. Only a few days earlier, she had idolized the silver buckskin. Had banished images of Vetch with the mere thought of her teacher’s intelligence and courage. Now she felt used, betrayed, endangered. A monster stood within ten strides of her, but she was not allowed to fly for her life.
“I must run,” Talus said. She saw the pen. She saw Penstemon lifting her head from the dirt. She saw Bitterroot, small and scared and surrounded in his final moment of freedom. “Let me run!”

“Don’t run. If you run, you will never learn the great secret. The secret to end all hate,” Aster said.

Talus continued to tremble. She watched the human with the mesmerized fear she usually reserved for snakes uncoiling themselves inch by supple inch. Beside her, Aster smelled of unchecked joy. Of happiness so intense it bordered on fervor.

The human raised her short front legs and peered into something long, round, and black. Talus nearly squealed in shock but caught herself before giving away their position. If the horses remained in the shadows next to the den and stayed quiet, they would go undetected.

“What’s she holding to her face?” Talus asked in a whisper.

“Her second eyes,” Aster said, voice low yet husky with delight. “Humans use them to look at things from a distance. This one likes to aim them at birds in the morning and evening.”

Talus’s surprise sharpened to astonishment. “Why?”

“Admiration. Some humans love the wild. Love us.” A wind sweetened by its trek through the sagebrush scrub parted Aster’s forelock. Suddenly she appeared as mysterious as her statement.

Talus gazed at the human, her pulse slowing slightly. She had always assumed every member of this most terrifying of species was evil. Bent on enslaving her and her friends. On stripping them of all that made them mustangs. But, if Aster could be trusted, the female with the extra set of eyes posed no threat to the animals of Mount Mesteño. In fact, the more Talus studied Double Sight, the more she sensed an innate goodness in her. The human’s features,
while malformed in the fashion of her kind, had an open, gentle quality that reminded the grulla of Draba.

“Watch this,” Aster said. She walked out of the shadows into Double Sight’s field of vision. In the dim light, the old mare’s off-white coat glowed like the bars on the underside of a nighthawk’s wings. She was even brighter than the flakes swirling around her fetlocks. Spurge herself had never been so magnificent.

Double Sight heard the silver buckskin’s hooves on the clay, lowered her second eyes, and turned toward the noise. She gasped the second she spotted Aster. A minute passed. Neither horse nor human moved. They simply stared at each other in a bizarre communion. A meeting of worlds. Only the length of Aster’s body and a veil of snow separated them.

Finally Aster broke the connection. She turned from Double Sight to Talus, her ears inviting the filly to join her. The old mare’s face was no longer soft with wonder, but taut with need. She seemed almost desperate to share the young human with her bandmate.

Talus hesitated in spite of her grudging respect for Double Sight. It was simply not natural to approach a human. But Aster had called this lesson the most important of all. The grulla trotted out from around the den on fear-sprung legs, ready to flee at the slightest movement. As she neared Aster, she slowed to a mincing walk, then stopped altogether.

Double Sight, her second eyes dangling from her neck, breathed quickly, excited by the new arrival. Talus lifted her head, tossed her forelock, and stared. Even semi-obscured by a screen of snow, Double Sight terrified. Talus struggled to make sense of her features. Could that pitiful mop of hair be a mane, that stub of flesh a muzzle, that dark slash a mouth? And what accident had wrenched the human’s spine so badly that she had to go about upright, rearing forever? Yet the gentleness Talus had spied earlier still suffused Double Sight’s countenance. So
did a searching, sincere intelligence. Aster was right. This human, at least, revered the same things mustangs revere. Thrilled to the sight of a red-tailed hawk on the wing, the sun igniting its flight feathers, to the sound of a mouse dashing frost from its whiskers, to the give of rain-moistened grass.

“I don’t believe it,” Talus said, speaking to Aster but maintaining eye contact with Double Sight. “Why are some of them like us?”

The silver buckskin said, “Because the world is more mysterious than we realize.”

Talus and Double Sight examined one another until the sky grayed. The human, though warmed by an odd, detachable coat, started to shiver. She looked at her den but did not return to it, apparently torn between refuge and the horses. Aster put an end to her dilemma—the old mare galloped off toward Mount Mesteño. Talus followed, her relief at being permitted to run carrying her across the fissured clay with abandon. She didn’t ease to a canter for several minutes.

“Slow down, Talus,” Aster gasped. “I’m not as fast as I used to be.”

The grulla checked herself and glanced at her companion. She couldn’t explain her feelings. Couldn’t articulate that her distrust of humans in general and her interest in Double Sight had collided, that the friction between them had sent her hurtling through the barrens. The entire situation was too complex for a yearling to understand.

Yet as the two mustangs left Double Sight far behind, entering the sagebrush once again, Talus reflected on Aster’s words: “Stay where you are or you’ll never learn the great secret. The secret to end all hate.” The filly thought she grasped that pronouncement at least. If not every human was bad, she didn’t have to despise the species as a whole. Every shed burden counted in a life hobbled by grief and guilt.
Darkness fell before Aster and Talus reached their band’s winter base. The creatures of the night surrounded them. A great horned owl sailed over the horses, the murk turning its eyes into solid silver orbs. Two coyotes, their gray fur ashen in the starlight, howled as if life itself had entered its death throes. Deer paused in their grazing to shake snow from their coats and question the gloom with large, leaf-shaped ears.

Talus felt love for the earth growing within her like a cloud. Bit by bit her affection for the wild coalesced into something large, beautiful, and brimming. At any moment, it might tear, open, and empty, flooding her young body with emotion. With ardor. With a tenderness so acute it was more closely related to pain than joy. The grulla’s world had been reconfigured to let hope in. The path to happiness—or at least acceptance of hardship—seemed less cluttered now. She would always fear the loss of her freedom, but she would never fear the loss of herself to rage. And she would cherish, too, the possibility that the humans who valued the land as much as she did would one day put a stop to roundups.

At last the silver buckskin and the grulla saw the ledge protecting their temporary home. They approached at a walk to avoid disturbing their bandmates. Talus spotted the other mustangs first. Only Fireweed was still awake, his eyes drops of water in the blackness. The rest dozed, the snow quietly roaning their backs. Draba’s ears worked in her sleep. Nearby, Starwort’s white facial marking stunned the shadows. Thistle’s tail swished. The normalcy of the reunion warmed Talus. She glanced at Aster, took her place at Draba’s side, and dreamed.
A week later, after the storm Hopsage had predicted frosted the sagebrush, Talus’s peace of mind came to an end. The grulla was pawing ice from a patch of grass so Starwort could eat when the smell of a lone mare made her nose tingle. She stiffened and gazed northwest. Less than a horse length away, Draba also went rigid. In the stillness, the scrubland, already hushed by winter, grew as silent as a frozen river.

Starwort prodded Talus’s barrel with his muzzle. “I’m hungry,” he said, tossing his forelock and stamping his hooves.

“Quiet!” the filly snapped. Her eyes were still fastened to the horizon.

“Starwort,” Draba said, as usual thinking more clearly than her sister, “tell Fireweed the brown mustang is heading this way.”

Starwort obeyed Draba, racing off across the ice-tricked sagebrush scrub as fast as his spindly legs could carry him. Talus watched him go, then turned north again. A dark figure had appeared to the left of the ledge. It gained definition as it advanced, transforming from a shadow into a hooved animal, from a hooved animal into a horse, from a horse into a mare. From a mare into Vetch. Talus, oddly, felt no panic. She was trapped in a terrible dream. A vision of horror. If escape was not possible, neither was fear. At her side, Draba, too, fell under their ex-bandmate’s muddy spell, unable to move, to rotate an ear or redistribute her weight.

“Is Fireweed almost here?” Talus asked. She didn’t dare look over her shoulder to see if the red dun was running up behind them.

Draba, equally helpless, cried, “I don’t know.” The pain in her sibling’s voice brought Talus back to the day Vetch went rogue. Violated the mustangs’ oldest law—love your
companions—by attacking her own family members. What else was this avenger, this mare robbed of her son and her sense, capable of?

The wind changed direction, blowing Talus’s and Draba’s scents toward Vetch. She propped, her great body atremble. No doubt she had recognized the grassy musk the grulla had inherited from Spurge, the breath of clover the dunalino had inherited from Milfoil. Now all three horses knew a reunion was about to take place.

Vetch sprang into a trot. Talus did the same. She wasn’t sure why. It would be several years before she could win a fight with a full-grown mustang, much less one of Vetch’s power. Perhaps guilt drew her to her adversary. She had wronged the brown mare. That she could not and would never deny. To battle was to make amends.

“Talus, no!” Draba gasped. “She weighs twice as much as you. She’ll cripple you. Kill you.”

The grulla replied, “So be it.” In the absence of fear, she thought only of Bitterroot. Of his jealousy and compassion. Of his insecurity and courage. Of his hunger for wildness, the wildness of Mount Mesteño and the wildness in his heart. It was all gone forever because of her. If anybody had to die at the hooves of the dun colt’s mother…

They met in the middle of the sagebrush. They did not speak. Vetch had been altered by life as a lone horse. The stress of fending for herself, of maintaining a stallion-like level of alertness to survive, had pared her frame to an angular, rickety thing. Her coat also seemed diminished. It clung to her bones like lichen to stone, threadbare yet unruly after months of self-grooming. Her face, however, had not lost its surliness. Beneath a dirty snarl of a forelock, Vetch’s eyes burned with hatred.
“Talus,” Vetch said, spitting out the name as though it would curdle if allowed to linger on her tongue, “how I hoped we would meet again. I see you still run with Draba. It must be wonderful to have a family member at your side all the time.”

The grulla remained silent, determined to let Vetch abuse her. Yet the brown mare’s words confused Talus. While the allusion to Bitterroot was obvious—since colts stay with their natal bands longer than fillies, the burly little dun would have lived with his dam for another year had he escaped the silver bird—Vetch’s voice shook with more than just sarcasm. More than just rage. Talus wondered if her mother’s old rival had tired of solitude, had wandered down the mountain in search of a new band only to find one that included the horse she loathed most in the world. The filly’s trepidation flowed back into her like feeling returning to a numb muscle. Vetch was dangerous angry. Disappointed, she could be deadly.

Her desire to protect herself reawakened, Talus took a step backward. She could hear Fireweed, Aster, and the others approaching at a gallop. Their rhythmic hoofbeats made her insides tingle with hope.

“Vetch, don’t start trouble here. My second family is strong—and loyal. Things will end badly for you,” Talus said, trying to appeal to the older mustang’s common sense for both their sakes.

The grulla’s statement did not have the intended effect. Vetch gazed past Talus at the oncoming horses as if estimating the number of blows she could land before they arrived, then whirled to lash out with her hind legs. Two gray-shelled feet struck the yearling in the chest, winding her. She staggered and dropped onto her knees. The fall jarred her. For a moment she couldn’t see properly. A white, liquid light pooled on the edges of her vision. Then Vetch’s
hindquarters appeared a few feet away from her face. The same sight had confronted Spurge not so long ago, in the instant before Larkspur chose his lead mare.

Talus scrambled upright, wheeled with her head raised to avoid a hit to the skull, and kicked as hard as she could. Kicked out of instinct. Kicked at the memory of her dam’s helplessness. Kicked at the dread that had made her feel as though she were in the shadow of a cloud ever since Draba first smelled a lone mare near the cirque. Kicked flesh as breakable as her own.

Talus’s hooves reverberated with the impact. The filly snorted in surprise. She had lashed out at an abstraction and expected to connect with one, too. But when she turned to see what she had done, the salty odor of blood entered her nostrils. Compared to the frigid winter air, the smell billowed with heat. It was a bizarre, bodily humidity—and it wafted from a deep wound above Vetch’s left hock.

Talus had barely registered her victory before Fireweed galloped up ahead of the band. He slowed when he realized the grulla did not need his protection and gawked at the brown mare.

“Did you do this?” he asked, indicating Vetch’s injury with a toss of his rusty forelock.

“Yes,” Talus said, dazed. She couldn’t pull her eyes from the red hole she had kicked in Vetch even after the rest of her family arrived. “I didn’t mean to, though. I was trying to get away. It just…happened.”

Vetch seemed as shocked as Talus. She described a circle in the sagebrush scrub in a fruitless attempt to walk off her lameness. Each limping, lurching stride sent tremors of horror through the onlookers. To animals that rely on agility to survive, crippling is a unique and
monstrous tragedy. It should not be wished on anyone. Not the double-crossers who lead their wild cousins into pens. Not stallions who trample their rivals’ foals. Not mares warped by hatred.

At last Vetch came to a stop, holding her damaged limb aloft. She confronted her audience on three legs and a bitter heart.

“How dare you!” she said as if the horses had mocked her pain. “How dare you stand there in perfect health…”

Thistle muttered to herself and Hopsage draped her neck across Starwort’s in a protective gesture. Apparently they thought Vetch was mad. Aster knew better. Talus had not told her about the brown mare’s dislike of Spurge, but the silver buckskin fixed the intruder with a look of cool comprehension.

“No, how dare you. What kind of mustang trespasses on another band’s territory and then attacks a yearling?” Aster said.

“You’re lucky Talus hurt you more than you hurt her,” Fireweed added, pinning his ears and raking the ground with a front hoof. “Otherwise you’d feel my teeth.”

The grulla, her guilt intensifying as she studied Vetch’s depleted frame and recognized how lopsided their battle had been, said, “Fireweed, leave her alone.”

The red dun rounded on Talus, and, behind her, Draba. His eyes sparked. “Leave her alone? Isn’t this mare your old family’s enemy?”

Vetch picked up her head. Agony could not dull her hunger for revenge. “So your new friends know about me. What else do they know?”

Talus knew what Vetch was going to say next. Panic seized the filly like an electrical storm about to break. Not yet full-blown but terrifying in its promise of doom, it raised the hair on her withers and whetted her senses. The sagebrush, each shrub a slate-colored island in an
ocean of snow, regained its green flush. The snow itself brightened to the awful white of a salt flat. Why, Talus wondered angrily, must the world sharpen before it deals its hardest blows?

“So you haven’t told them,” Vetch said, her eyes glittering. “And of course devoted little Draba would keep your secret. I think it’s time they heard the truth, don’t you?”

Fireweed nudged Talus and asked, “What’s going on? Should I drive her away now?”

“Yes!” Draba cried. “Get her out of here!”

The grulla quashed her sister’s command with a stamp of her hoof. Suddenly exhausted, she said, “Let her speak. I’m tired of hiding my past. Vetch, you win. Take your revenge.”

The brown mare’s gaze dimmed for a moment. Talus suspected her old bandmate had expected—and craved—despair. “With pleasure,” Vetch said, rallying and turning to Aster.

“You were quick to condemn me for trading blows with the grulla. We’ll see if you feel the same by the end of my tale.”

The silver buckskin did not react, but Thistle, Hopsage, and Starwort looked from Vetch to Talus with intense curiosity. Fireweed, unable to resort to force, lashed his tail irritably. Draba pinned her ears. She was either afraid for her sibling or of being punished herself. Talus couldn’t say which. Nor could she afford to reflect on the matter. Vetch had begun her story.

Pain had preserved the burly mustang’s memory; the tragedy unfolded in harrowing detail. Arrogant young Talus burst from cover, leading the other foals into the path of the great bird. The mares ran after their offspring only to be chased downhill to the pen. Penstemon died by thunder-bark, her coat caked with dirt, her broken leg bent upward at the knee. Humans surrounded Bitterroot. Shunted him into the nameless one. Ripped him from the mountain he would have ruled like Larkspur before him. Killed his dam but left her living.
Vetch’s account warped reality—Bitterroot had never resembled his father except in color—but not beyond recognition. As Talus listened, she felt the enormity of the roundup and her role in it as much as ever. Unlike most of her key experiences, which, when remembered, detached themselves from her for ease of inspection, this one was always present, always immediate, always blooded.

When Vetch finished, Talus stared at the sky to avoid making eye contact with her bandmates. Snow had begun to fall, tumbling to the earth haphazardly but silently. Transferring its hush to the scrublands. It struck the grulla, seeped into her fur, and melted against her hot skin.

“Well,” Vetch said, her three good legs straining to bear her weight, “what do you think of the filly now?”

Aster stepped forward, still calm and cold. “My opinion hasn’t changed. But then you didn’t tell me anything new. Bistort heard about your band’s capture while he was in the stallion pen with Larkspur. I got the details from him after the roundup.”

Talus flinched as if she had been kicked in the stomach. Beside her, Draba also responded with shock, gawking at the lead mare. Fireweed, Thistle, Hopsage, and Starwort simply flirted their ears. Kept in the dark by both the yearlings and the silver buckskin, they weren’t sure how to approach the situation.

Yet nobody was more perturbed than Vetch. “You knew? You knew but let her join your family anyway?”

“I knew but chose her to be my successor anyway,” Aster said. “One day Talus will run at the front of this band—and I have no doubt she will develop into one of the finest mares Mount Mesteño has ever seen.”
Vetch, already diminished by her solitary lifestyle, received the information like a physical blow. All strength rushed from her, leaving her neck lank, her muscles toneless, and her hindquarters without their usual tension. She reminded Talus of a sick bird. A bird that, brushed by death, surrenders without a fight, slumps on its perch, and waits for the world to dim.

“I used to respect you, Aster,” Vetch said, her voice so soft it could barely be heard over the patter of the snow, “but now I see you’re as undeserving a lead mare as Spurge—and Talus if she fulfills your plans.”

Aster replied, “Yet I am not the one standing on three legs. Fireweed, it’s time to drive this trespasser away, don’t you think?”

The red dun advanced with his head lowered and his muzzle taut with fury. Vetch retreated a few bobbing steps. Once she had put some distance between herself and the stallion, she looked back over her shoulder. Her eyes roved from Thistle to Hopsage, then lingered on Starwort.

“Blue roan, bay, little bay,” Vetch said, “come with me. Surely you don’t want to remain in a band destined to be run by Talus. She’ll bring you to grief the same as her first family.”

The grulla studied her bandmates, trying to decide if they were tempted by Vetch’s offer. Thistle pushed her ears forward in a gesture of sympathy—Lupine no doubt galloped across the meadow of her mind—but stayed where she was. Hopsage showed more open hostility. Probably reacting to the longing with which Vetch gazed at Starwort, the bay squared up to warn the interloper to leave the group alone. Talus began to shake, waves of gratitude rolling down her back and ebbing in her hindquarters. They had chosen her. They had chosen her even after Vetch told them of the roundup.
Fireweed advanced again, his anger intensified by the brown mare’s attempt to divide his family. His coat released a hot, sweaty odor. The odor a horse releases seconds before it lunges into combat. Had the stallion forgotten that he only had to oust a lame and underweight female?

“Fireweed, stop! Let her go when she’s ready. She can’t hurt us anymore,” Talus cried.

The red dun paused, his muscles quivering, then relaxing. He glanced at Aster, who tossed her forelock as if to say the choice was his. “Fine. I won’t chase her off,” Fireweed said, adding, to Vetch, “you can rest in our territory until you’re sound enough to find your own winter home. But don’t you dare talk to or approach any of us. If you do, I’ll run you so far so fast you’ll be lame in all four legs when I’m through with you.”

Aster snorted in agreement. “You’re lucky Talus is more merciful than Fireweed and I are,” she said coldly. For a moment the grulla thought the air around her leader would freeze and fracture like a sheet of ice. It seemed the silver buckskin was not always a gentle, reasonable creature.

The horses left Vetch standing by herself at the edge of their winter range. Talus, walking beside Draba, looked back in time to see the brown mare being engulfed by snow. Her dark silhouette broke up, then faded altogether. The grulla recalled watching Bitterroot recede into a storm a year earlier, after his fight with Lupine. One day Vetch, too, would be a memory. An increasingly generic figure trotting through the dreams of the few who had loved her. Perhaps that day would come soon—Talus knew she could not have defeated a healthy Vetch.

“Don’t worry,” Draba said. “She’ll survive as long as she rests her leg before moving on. You probably saved her life by convincing Fireweed to let her stay here for a while.”

Talus said, “That’s why I’m scared for her in spite of all the pain she’s caused me.”
Draba regarded Talus with a quizzical expression. She clearly didn’t understand what her sister meant. But the grulla couldn’t articulate the source of her unease. To a wild animal, a creature obsessed with survival, suicide is incomprehensible. Yet something deep inside Vetch had ended when Talus interceded on her behalf. The lone mustang could live with defeat, but not gratitude.

In the evening, while the horses were digging holes in the snow to reach the grass beneath, Talus approached Aster. The silver buckskin turned toward her pupil with an air of expectation.

“You’ve come to ask me why I chose to pass on my knowledge to you even after hearing about the roundup,” she said.

“Yes,” Talus said. “Are you sure you weren’t mistaken?”

Aster raised her beautiful eyes to the sky as if weighing her words carefully. Talus also lifted her gaze. The heavens, cloudless now that the cold front had moved on, reminded the filly of the unblemished hide of a young stallion.

“When I met you last winter, I knew right away you had the courage, intelligence, and athleticism of a lead mare,” Aster said after a minute. “But I wasn’t sure if you had another, equally important quality—humility. Then Bistort told me what happened to your band. It occurred to me your tragedy might become your greatest strength. A reminder that even the smartest, swiftest horse walks a narrow path between survival and death, freedom and capture, joy and despair. A lesson I couldn’t teach you because some knowledge must be felt rather than learned.”

“I do feel it. I feel my own smallness in my coat, skin, muscles, and bones. In every hair in my mane and tail,” Talus said, her insides spreading with wonder.
“Good. Cherish that sensation no matter how uncomfortable it makes you. It breeds prudence.”

“Do you have it, too? This felt knowledge?”

Aster turned her creek-brown eyes on Talus in reply. Even in the dim, dove-colored light, they shimmered with grief. The grulla remembered the old mare’s lost foals. Could they have escaped the roundup with better parenting? Perhaps Aster thought so. And perhaps her self-reproach, like Talus’s guilt, had shamed her into wisdom.

The yearling nuzzled Aster, initiating social contact between them for the first time. Usually the silver buckskin, as the older mustang, controlled their interactions. But Talus couldn’t resist a display of affection now that she knew they were sisters in sorrow. Maybe Spurge also belonged to this sorority. Maybe all the lead mares on the mountain did. Galloping ahead of their families, as confident and beautiful as life itself, they each burned with the same secret pain: the pain of responsibility.

Aster and Talus groomed one another, then drew apart, their bond stronger than ever. The grulla joined Draba, who, tired of digging for grass, was nibbling the frozen crown of a sagebrush shrub. An unappetizing, brittle smell billowed into the air as the dunalino browsed. Talus retracted her nostrils.

“Doesn’t that taste awful?” she asked.

“Yes, but I keep cutting my fetlocks on the snow’s crust,” Draba said, lifting a front foot to show Talus a thin ring of blood encircling the area above her hoof, “and I’d rather eat bland food than lame myself.”

“Look. Thistle’s uncovered a big patch of grass and she’s sharing it with Hopsage and Starwort. I bet she’ll let us have some, too.”
Talus approached Thistle, Hopsage, and Starwort. At first her strides were confident. Long and brisk. But her pace slowed as she neared her bandmates. They had chosen her over Vetch. They had not absolved her. Maybe things would be different now. Maybe the other horses wouldn’t want to associate with a filly who had brought about her own family’s destruction.

Thistle turned an ear toward Talus and sidestepped to make room for the newcomer. Hopsage, too, moved over, taking Starwort with her. These simple actions swept away the grulla’s fears like driftwood in a swift river. The young mustang could almost see them vanishing in white-edged water. Struggling against the current of her redemption until their strong, dark bodies succumbed to exhaustion. She lowered her muzzle and grazed, picking at the snow-flattened grass with relish. It had lost much of its goodness during its chilly exile, but Talus thought she had never tasted anything better. For the first time since the roundup, she was relating to her fellow horses without wondering if they hated her or guarding a secret.

Draba joined her sister. The two fed flank to flank, their tails swishing lazily. Neither spoke. There was no need. Both yearlings already knew the sorrow that had tracked them from their father’s territory to the cirque and finally to the sagebrush scrub had gone after different prey at last. Talus was no longer in danger of exposure, Draba of sharing in her shame. Above them, the gray sky turned purple, then blue, then black. As the temperature dropped, the grulla lifted her head, gazed at the stars beginning to appear in the firmament, and sensed cold days awaited. The revelation did not bother her. She had survived the worst phase of her life.
Vetch was gone. Talus searched the scrubland for signs of the brown mare without success. No equine figure interrupted the sun-dazzled tracts of snow. No equine smell rode the wind that skimmed the earth, an enormous, invisible, and frosty swallow. No equine sound—a telltale snort or the snap of a hoof breaking ice—disturbed the morning.

“Is she hiding?” Fireweed asked, walking up to Talus. “Surely she wouldn’t try to pull off a surprise attack. Not with a bad leg.”

“I think she just wandered off,” the filly said.

Draba trotted over and said, “Isn’t Vetch too experienced to do something like that? Even we yearlings know not to leave the lower elevations in winter—especially if we’re weak or injured.”

“I guess,” Talus said to pacify Draba. She still believed Vetch had gone off to die. Perhaps the brown mare had returned to the highlands, where a horse length of snow covered the grass. Or, preferring a violent end to starvation, she might have sought out a mountain lion. Either way, she would die on her own terms in the wilderness she loved. Her bones would not lie near some human den. They would be cleaned by coyotes and scattered by crows. Borne aloft on the last great journey they would ever take. And, years later, after they had been ground to a fine, sparrow-colored dust, they would be turned by the hooves of the next generation of mustangs. There were worse fates.

That afternoon Talus’s lessons started up again. While the rest of the band grazed, Aster spoke quietly to her pupil.
“I’ve taught you to pay attention to Mount Mesteño, but not to your family members,” the silver buckskin said. “This was an oversight—every lead mare must know the strengths and weaknesses of her companions in order to keep them safe.”

Talus flicked her ears to show she understood. After all, her dam had always adjusted her actions to the needs of the rank-and-file mustangs. If Penstemon tired during a group run, Spurge would slow down just enough to give the old chestnut a breather without losing momentum. If a bandmate went into heat, Spurge would avoid bachelor stallions, saving Larkspur a fight. The concept made sense. Talus simply hadn’t put it to use before.

“So what are their strengths and weaknesses?” the grulla asked, indicating Thistle, Hopsage, Starwort, and Draba with a toss of her forelock.

“Find out yourself. Observe them one by one and tell me what you think.”

Talus studied Thistle first. The blue roan was eating snow. Even engaged in such a routine activity, she radiated power. Her muscular shoulders and defined withers would have given her a humpbacked, elk-like appearance if not for her equally developed hindquarters. This was a horse capable of great physical exertion, a horse who would still be trembling with vigor long after her friends’ heads began to dip with exhaustion.

“Thistle is big but fit. A real boulder of a mare. She’s useful to the family because she can defend the weaker mustangs from predators, cover many miles in a day, and use her weight to break the ice on frozen waterholes.”

“Good. But what are her faults?”

Talus looked again. The roan’s light gray body was pocked, scratched, and raked by the teeth of other horses. Her dark base coat had grown in where the skin had been damaged, turning her into a map of past conflicts. Thistle’s moodiness must have gotten her into a number of
scrapes over the years. Though time—and the loss of Lupine—had gentled her to an extent, she could still be unpleasant. But Talus was more troubled by the blue roan’s stolid manner. Confident in her speed and strength, Thistle seldom paused to assess the day with her ears or lift her nose to the wind. Younger, weaker horses could not afford such carelessness.

“Well, she obviously has a temper—that coat is as scuffed as a stallion’s—but her lack of caution bothers me the most,” Talus said. “Every band member ought to stay alert, if not for her sake, then for the sake of the weaker mustangs.”

Aster said, “I agree. Now tell me about Hopsage and Starwort.”

The bays, framed by sagebrush, were engaged in an ancient drama. Whenever Starwort attempted to nurse, extending his neck and licking his lips, Hopsage stepped to one side. Winter had sapped her milk supply, forcing her to wean her son earlier than usual. Their interaction highlighted their best and worst qualities. Hopsage’s repeated though loving evasions attested to her patient disposition. But they also revealed a fear of confrontation. If the mare couldn’t get tough with her own foal, how would she respond to aggression from a rival band? Likewise, Starwort’s persistent efforts to reach his dam’s teats displayed both an obstinacy that would help him survive and a stupidity that might do the opposite.

“Hopsage is like Draba—kind. Maybe too kind. Starwort is stubborn for an undersized colt. That’s probably why he’s made it this far. But sometimes his determination gets him into trouble,” Talus observed.

“Yes,” Aster said, slightly amused. “He did nearly get himself drowned. How about Draba?”

The dunalino grazed next to Fireweed. Dwarfed by the red dun, Draba seemed even more insubstantial than usual. Hunger had given her a squeezed appearance. Also, in the dim afternoon
light, her yellow body turned the pale brown of a wren’s egg, a color Talus associated with fragility. The grulla’s chest constricted with the pain of loving something delicate.

“Are you all right?” Aster asked.

Talus had tucked her tail between her legs: a sign of fear. “It’s just...she’s small and timid and she can’t breathe properly. I’m scared I’ll outlive her.”

“You’re not taking her other traits into account.”

The young mustang examined her sister again. Draba was slight, but she quivered with energy from her muzzle to her rump. Her nostrils expanded and contracted regularly, her large brown eyes scanned the sagebrush scrub, her fur-lined ears rotated, and her tail swung from side to side. The dunalino’s vulnerability had honed her into one of the most vigilant horses in the band. Talus had long recognized Draba’s wisdom, courage, and selflessness, but she had never before noticed this attentiveness.

“She’s wary. That will protect her,” Talus said more confidently.

“Yes,” Aster said. “Horses like Draba are as important as their stronger, faster bandmates. They often sense danger before anyone else. Pay attention to them and you’ll be ready to lead the group to safety at the first sign of a threat.”

Talus eyeballed the silver buckskin. The old mare had obviously conducted a thorough investigation of each member of her family. What did she think of her grulla successor? Aster had told Talus she was brave, fast, and, thanks to the roundup, humble. But the filly wanted to know more. She wished she could see herself as she appeared to her teacher, could see boldness in the breadth of her face, pride in the carriage of her head, vigor in her strides, restlessness in the sweep of her tail. Remembered pain in the twitch of her coat.

“What are my good and bad traits?” Talus asked, trying to sound nonchalant.
Aster said, “I can’t tell you that. My impressions of you would influence the way you think about yourself. A lead mare should form her identity on her own.”

“Why?”

“Because only a mustang who knows herself intimately can act in the best interests of her band. You didn’t know yourself when you attempted to outrun the silver bird, did you?”

“No.”

“Well, what have you learned today?”

Talus looked at her family to refresh her memory. Starwort had given up on Hopsage; he sniffed at a patch of snow-moistened grass, crinkled his nose, and engaged Fireweed in a mock fight over Draba. The grulla suddenly became very aware of the distance between Aster and her and the rest of the horses.

“Thistle is powerful but not observant, Hopsage can be too gentle, Starwort—”

“No, tell me what you learned in general. What you can apply to any band.”

Talus turned one ear toward Aster to indicate she was considering the matter. “I learned that a good lead mare knows those she runs with—and herself.”

“Excellent,” Aster said. “The next time we travel as a family, watch me closely. Find out how your friends’ strengths and weaknesses impact my decisions as leader.”

“What about Fireweed? We didn’t talk about him.”

Aster aimed a brown eye at Talus. “There’s quite an attraction between you two, isn’t there? I don’t blame you—he’s almost as handsome as your brother Bistort and you’re growing into a beautiful mare. Forget about Fireweed for now, though. We’ll discuss how to work with band stallions later.”
Talus pretended to sample the wizened brown skeleton of a sagebrush shrub to hide her surprise, embarrassment, and pleasure. She had never considered herself an especially pretty mustang. Her coat did not shimmer from black to bronze to black again like Bistort’s. Her features were not as fine as Draba’s or Hopsage’s. Her tail was not a red streamer like Fireweed’s.

But Talus didn’t realize how much she had changed since she left her mother’s band. Her wanderings with Aster had added muscle to her weedy yearling’s frame, padding her shoulders and rounding her hindquarters. Her coat, once the gray of crushed ash, had darkened to a splendid, dusky hue—the color of rain in a storm cloud. And her eyes, opened to the wonders of Mount Mesteño by the silver buckskin’s teachings, gleamed like two wet stones pushed deep into her face. Only the hairless welt raised by Spurge’s teeth on the day of the roundup detracted from the young mustang’s appearance.

Nevertheless, Talus believed Aster. The old mare had never done wrong by her pupil even during their most dangerous lessons. She no longer seemed capable of making a mistake, much less lying about something as serious as beauty.

Talus remained in high spirits for the rest of the afternoon. Gripped by a heady awareness of her good looks, she minced through the snow, spraying her belly with white powder. Occasionally she even dropped, rolled, and heaved herself upright, a harlequin of fur and frost.

Thistle snorted disapprovingly, but Starwort couldn’t resist a good romp. He cavorted and capered in Talus’s wake. She slowed to let him think he was outrunning her. While they played, the grulla sensed the eyes of her bandmates upon her. The eyes of Fireweed upon her. Self-conscious, she eased to a dignified walk. But when she glanced at the stallion, she saw his
muzzle was soft with tenderness, not taut with judgment. No horse except Spurge had ever gazed at her with more love.
A week later, winter did its worst. The heaviest snowfall Talus had experienced since her foalhood hid the ground. The earth groaned beneath its chill burden. Then a terrible wind came, stirring up so many flurries the air turned silver and the mustangs thought they had been swallowed by a ghost. Not even the ledge that had protected them thus far lessened their discomfort. Finally Aster decided to take the band to the clay barrens, where the cold was less intense but they would have to subsist on sagebrush and greasewood.

As soon as the blizzard died, the horses set off. They entered silence itself. The snow lay still after hours of being tossed like spume. The birds that had stayed on Mount Mesteño in spite of the freeze didn’t utter a sound, though sometimes their beaks opened and shut. A wooly brown fawn, likely lost during the storm, searched for its mother in vain—the frigid weather had left its throat too sore to bleat out its location.

Talus passed the time by observing both Aster and the rank-and-filers. Soon she was able to tell how her bandmates’ characteristics affected the old mare’s decisions. If bold but inattentive Thistle pressed forward into unknown territory without pausing to appraise the land with her ears and nose, Aster would speed up to stay in the lead, then set a cautious pace. If one of the weaker horses fell behind, she would either slow down or accelerate, causing Fireweed to nip the laggard into a gallop, depending on the urgency of the situation. Once, when Draba propped and threw back her head, the silver buckskin brought the group to a halt. The mustangs scanned the sagebrush scrub until they spotted the source of the dunalino’s unease: a coyote huddled in the lee of a lone juniper, watching Starwort with hungry yellow eyes. Fireweed chased it away.
Talus quivered with excitement as Aster’s skill became more and more apparent. Under the old mare’s guidance, the band moved like a flock of birds, each animal reacting to its neighbors without thought. Not even Spurge had achieved such harmony, had turned her posse into a single constantly expanding and contracting being. The grulla glanced at Draba to see if she, too, was exhilarated. But the blonde filly seemed unaware of the chain of events—directional adjustments transferred from horse to horse—that determined her every step.

Eventually the mustangs entered the barrens. Talus recognized Double Sight’s den, a hitch in the horizon, and suddenly longed to know how humans coped with winter. But other matters were more pressing. A pair of bachelors had also left Mount Mesteño in search of better forage. They had a filly who appeared too young to be without her dam in their possession, an unusual circumstance.

“She’s not much older than Starwort!” Draba cried. “Why is she running with those two?”

Talus didn’t answer. She was too busy assessing the strangers—and the stretch of scrubland both sets of horses wanted. The first bachelor, a dark brown stud with a blaze that drizzled down his face like liquid salt, had yet to reach full weight. The second, a dun with a bi-colored mane, looked almost as heavy as Fireweed. He also showed signs of aggression; when the filly, a near-white palomino, began to approach Aster’s group, he bared his teeth.

The presence of a stallion as strong as Fireweed was a problem. The presence of a stallion as strong as Fireweed on land that could not support two bands was a setup for violence. Talus switched her tail nervously—the barrens were large, but sagebrush and greasewood offered little nourishment compared to grass. She and her family needed the run of the area to feed themselves. The grulla glanced at Aster to gauge her reaction. When their eyes met, the
young mustang saw her own anxiety reflected in her mentor’s normally placid gaze. Helplessness, too, darted across the old mare’s face. The horses’ well-being depended on Fireweed’s quickness and power now.

   Neck curved, barrel inflated, the red dun stepped forward to confront his rivals. Talus’s heart beat for him. Winter had dulled and tousled his clay-colored coat, but the filly thought he had never looked more noble. Draba seemed to agree; standing at her sister’s side, the dunalino lifted her head and pricked her ears.

   “I claim this territory for my mares,” Fireweed said to the dun bachelor. “Leave at once or I’ll make you regret it.”

   The dun tossed his blonde and black forelock, then churned the snow with his right front hoof. “Pah! You’re not much older and heavier than I am.”

   “And you’re outnumbered,” the bachelor with the salt blaze added. “Do you really think you can take on both of us at once?”

   Fireweed snorted and said, “Some of my mares can kick. Your palomino isn’t very hardy, though. Why is she running with you, anyway? She can’t be a year old yet.”

   “What’s it to you? She’ll be a yearling soon,” the dun said, his muzzle tensing as if he couldn’t wait to rake his teeth across Fireweed’s hide.

   Horror spidered through Talus’s gut. Occasionally stallions desperate for mates but not yet big enough to win a harem of mares will steal immature fillies, but the grulla had not encountered this phenomenon before. The idea of being forced to live with a pair of studs determined to get into as many scraps as possible terrified her. A mustang subjected to such living conditions would be in a constant state of stress. Talus regarded the palomino with empathy, trying to commiserate with her wordlessly. It was no use. The wretched creature, either
too afraid of the bachelors or too weak from hunger to register her surroundings, simply blinked in the watery sunlight.

“Well, she won’t be able to give you a foal for a long time,” Fireweed observed, perhaps hoping to annex the palomino and put an end to her ordeal.

“That won’t be an issue when we defeat you and have our pick of your mares,” the dun said. “I like that grulla best.”

The red dun charged. Talus had never seen a stallion move so fast. The meaty thunder of bodies connecting shattered the hush that had fallen over the barrens. A moment later, the dun lay dazed in the snow. He made a feeble effort to rise, but Fireweed stuck him with steely forehooves and he sank down again. For an instant Talus thought the red dun was going to trample his opponent. She looked away, not wanting to see her future mate seriously injure—or even maim—another horse. His face would change in the moment of violence just as the faces of the mustangs in the pen had changed when they turned on their neighbors, ears flattened, eyes rolling, lips curled to expose long gray teeth. That expression would haunt his features for years, lingering like an afterimage. Dulling affection.

But, instead of the bright snap of bones, Talus heard a soft nickering. She swung her head around. The palomino was begging Fireweed to leave the dun alone. Her voice, low but insistent, touched the grulla. It must have moved Fireweed as well; he retreated a few paces to show that he would not renew his attack.

“The grulla is mine,” he said sternly. “They are all mine, as I am theirs. Get up and get out of the barrens.”

The dun struggled to his feet. “All right. All right. We’re on our way.”
As his friend recovered, the brown bachelor stared at Fireweed. Talus pawed the ground, dreading a second battle. But the young stallions knew they were defeated. They could not beat Fireweed unless they worked together and the dun no longer had the strength to fight.

“Come on,” the brown said to the palomino, herding her with thrusts of his head. “We’ll find food somewhere else.”

Talus watched the three horses depart in sorrow. Fireweed had not had the chance to rescue the filly. Already weak from stress, she might not survive the winter without decent grazing. One morning the bachelors would wake to find her lying still on the frozen earth, her barrel deflated as if she had just released one long breath, her ribs visible through her scruffy coat, her legs extended, stiff and brittle from rigor mortis. They would probably blame the band that had ousted them from the barrens. And they would be right.

“Excellent, Fireweed,” Aster said, nuzzling the red dun on the cheek.

“Yes!” Thistle cried. “At last we can fill our bellies!”

“I wish we could have helped the palomino, though,” Hopsage said. Draba nodded in agreement.

Fireweed said nothing. He gazed out across the snow-dusted landscape, his great body quivering. Talus recognized his pain: the pain of a leader who has killed for his family. He had not hurt the filly, had not felt her spine buckle beneath his hooves, but he had doomed her nonetheless. Someday the grulla would be in the same predicament. The heart pays the price of responsibility.

“Fireweed, are you okay?” Talus asked after the others began to feed on small islands of sagebrush and greasewood.
The red dun simply said, “Why did she stop me? I might have saved her if the fighting hadn’t ended so quickly.”

Talus didn’t know. She was as bewildered as her stallion. Perhaps the palomino hated bloodshed more than living with bachelors. Perhaps she had developed a grudging attachment to her captors. Perhaps she loved them like bandmates in spite of everything. If so, the grulla understood. She had never gotten along with surly Vetch and jealous Bitterroot, but their misfortunes hurt her all the same. A horse couldn’t help but love her companions. Their presence alone protected and sustained her. How could the palomino not cry out at the sight of a familiar form—even one that had caused her grief—about to be broken?

“It isn’t your fault, Fireweed,” Talus said. “Animals have to put themselves and their families first to survive. If you had let those three stay, we might not have found enough to eat. We’re going to have to forage constantly as it is.”

The young mustang spoke in a calm, wise manner for Fireweed’s benefit. Inside, she was troubled. Spurge had taught her the value of selflessness for as far back as she could remember. Now cruelty had delivered her band from hunger. The contradiction made Talus’s head throb and her pulse quicken. She left the red dun without another word. He didn’t stop her. In that moment they both realized sadness doesn’t always have to be shared. Sometimes it is better off experienced in isolation. Experienced fully.

Talus walked off through the barrens. Her hooves sank into the snow and touched firm, heat-fractured clay. She recalled her previous trip across this land, when Aster showed her not all humans hate wild things. The world had been so different then, so much more hopeful, so much more full of color and texture.
“Oh, Mother,” the grulla said, pausing to scan the area, “why must life be kind and hard at once?”

The barrens didn’t answer. They simply whitened as they neared the horizon. Only the odd sagebrush or greasewood shrub kept them from blending into a single ashen sheet. Talus’s fetlocks tingled. The filly lifted a foot in surprise. Snow had melted against her hot skin, leaving the hair on her legs ruffled and moist. She wished her body heat could destroy the harsh law of survival as well, could sweep across Mount Mesteño and burn it clean of everything but the gentle. That, of course, was impossible. Talus returned to her family and began to feed in earnest. Hunger lay ahead.
CHAPTER 38

The horses spent their days eating. They moved from one shrub to the next, gleaning as many nutrients as they could without overgrazing the plants. Yet their stomachs continued to rumble and contract with pain. The foliage that grew in the clay barrens was spare, bland, and dry even in the spring. By the height of the winter, it had been leached of all goodness. Talus would have thought she was consuming air if the vegetation didn’t sit in her belly so heavily.

But somehow the mustangs stayed alive—and strengthened their familial ties. They identified and satisfied their bandmates’ needs as naturally as they turned their ears toward distant noises. If the wind picked up in the evening, the adults would shield their younger companions, absorbing the chilly gusts with equanimity. If Fireweed, exhausted by the cold and his duty to guard the mares, started to lose alertness, Aster would help him check the land for predators.

Talus continued to catalogue her bandmates’ strengths and weaknesses. Even during the worst blizzards, she forced her numb ears to track the movements of her companions. Eventually the grulla could anticipate the other horses’ actions as easily as she could anticipate her own heartbeat. Aster must have noticed. Toward the close of winter, the old mare approached her pupil with welcome news.

Fireweed and Thistle were kicking holes in a frozen seep while the rest of the mustangs looked on, eager for a drink. Talus tried not to lick her lips. Real water—as opposed to a mouthful of snow—was hard to come by in the barrens. She couldn’t wait to soothe her cold-scoured throat with the cool but not painfully icy liquid.

“Talus,” Aster said, appearing at the filly’s side, “it’s time for your next lesson.”
The grulla, startled by her mentor’s silent advance, flinched. After a moment, she recovered and asked, “Are we leaving the group?”

“No. Follow me so we can talk.”

Talus glanced at the seep. Water liberated by Thistle’s hard hooves glistened in the runny morning light. The young horse turned away reluctantly. She caught up to the silver buckskin near a spray of greasewood draped with ice.

Aster said, “Do you remember when I said we would discuss the lead mare-band stallion partnership? Discuss Fireweed?”

Talus lifted her head and pricked her ears. “Yes!” she cried. “Fireweed—”

“Hold on. We’ll get to him later. First tell me the role of the lead mare and the band stallion.”

“The lead mare guides her family to safety when danger strikes. She also knows where to find the best food and shelter. The band stallion scans the land for predators, fights off rivals, and keeps his mates from straying.”

Talus pushed out her barrel. She felt as proud as a male grouse after a successful lekking. Spurge and Larkspur had made her intensely aware of the different yet equally important duties of the sexes. This lesson would be easy.

But Aster didn’t seem impressed. She stared at Talus with an expectant glow in her eyes. When it became clear the filly had nothing to add, the silver buckskin said, “What else? Think of your mother and father. How did they work together to protect you and your bandmates from harm?”

Talus lashed her tail. She had always considered her parents a team, had sensed they were in constant communication though they ran at opposite ends of the group. Yet she had never
discerned their system. “I don’t know,” the grulla admitted. “They just understood one another really well, I guess.”

“You do know. Picture their interactions. How did Larkspur warn Spurge when he spotted a predator?”

Talus summoned her memories of a summer afternoon. She, Bitterroot, and Draba were playing in the creek-split meadow north of the juniper belt. Galloping in a circle around her siblings, the grulla spied Larkspur sniffing the air a few horse lengths away. Suddenly he cranked his head back so far his neck seemed to slide into his withers and thrust his ears forward. A moment later, he wheeled toward the nearest mares—Penstemon and Currant. Before Talus could puzzle out his actions, Spurge leaped into flight, drawing the band with her. Running at her dam’s tail with the wind in her spiky foal’s mane, the grulla looked about for the source of the adults’ panic. She didn’t learn that Larkspur had smelled a mountain lion until the group reached the junipers and slowed to a trot.

Talus glanced at Aster. “I remember once he threw up his head, pricked his ears, and came at the mares. Then my mother led us away from the threat,” she said.

“Yes,” Aster said, flirting her mane for emphasis, “stallions do that to show they’ve detected danger. It’s the lead mare’s signal to get the others to safety.”

Talus fell silent, disturbed by her ignorance. Spurge had been the beautiful black center of her foalhood, the horse around which her existence revolved. How could she have missed the messages passing between the dark mare and the battle-scarred stallion? Had she been too fixated on her own promise to notice anything that didn’t directly concern her?

Aster bumped Talus with her muzzle. “Pay attention. This is an important lesson.”

“Sorry. So I need to know my stallion’s alarm posture?”
“Right. But you need to know more than that. A strong leader can tell when her mate is tense, calm, angry, or content. His mood often predicts conflicts. If he appears aggressive, he may have sensed a rival male, for example.”

The grulla observed Fireweed. He was drinking from the seep with the rest of the mustangs. Even as he sucked up water, his nose ringed in ripples, he scanned the barrens for enemies. Talus was glad her sex had spared her from constant vigilance. “I’m pretty familiar with Fireweed.”

“Not enough. Study him as much as you can. The next time he spots trouble, I expect you to be the first to respond.”

Talus nibbled the frosty sagebrush to hide her anxiety. Aster had never demanded results before. But the filly dared not complain. In the spring, she would turn two—old enough to breed. She would no longer be coddled. It was best to start taking responsibility now.

Over the following days, Talus examined the red dun obsessively. Whenever the horses roamed the lowlands, pausing to feed at every spray of vegetation they encountered, the young mustang kept her eyes trained on Fireweed. Initially she didn’t notice anything remarkable about his behavior. He ate a little sagebrush or greasewood, then resumed his duties as sentry. Once in a while he rolled back his upper lip, baring his incisors and gums, to investigate a strange odor. Larkspur had acted the same way while guarding his mares.

But one morning when the mustangs were resting near a large juniper that had somehow thrived in the clay-rich soil, the red dun began to quiver.

Talus, reclining in the snow next to Draba, immediately rose to study Fireweed. He had not yet lifted his head and cocked his ears in the classic alert position of stallions, but the grulla knew he was not shivering from the cold. Only adrenaline could course through a horse’s coat so
continuously. She followed his gaze to the point where the barrens climbed into the sagebrush scrub. As far as she could tell, there was nothing there. Perhaps the red dun had worked himself up over his own thoughts. Though Mount Mesteño still groaned under the weight of winter, the air had lost its brittleness, an early sign of spring. The mustangs could not help but look forward to returning to the cirque.

“Draba,” Talus said, turning away from Fireweed, “when we get home, the first thing I’m going to do is wallow in the tarn—”

At that moment, the red dun whirled in Aster’s direction. The old mare broke into a canter and the entire band shadowed her. While she high-stepped through the fetlock-deep powder, Talus glanced over her withers to see Fireweed repeatedly pausing to make sure his family wasn’t being tracked. She faced forward again and picked up her ears—at last she had discovered the stallion’s pre-danger body language. The next time he started to tremble, she would be in motion before he even warned the others.

“What happened?” Thistle asked as soon as the horses slowed down a half mile away.

“There was a human in the sagebrush scrub. It appeared to be watching us,” Fireweed answered.

All of the mustangs except for Aster, Talus, and Starwort flinched at “human.” The silver buckskin and the grulla suspected their protector had spied the harmless Double Sight. Starwort, who had never come across a two-legged before, danced in place to contain his curiosity.

A week later, a real threat arrived. Talus and her bandmates, invigorated by relatively mild weather, rollicked like foals, running, bucking, and rolling in the snow. As usual, Fireweed acted as sentinel. The grulla challenged Starwort to a game of tag. They galloped in a circle
around their family, pounding a bluish ring into the ground. Talus pulled up on the outside of the group. Starwort joined her, rearing to drape his forelegs across her neck.

The filly shrugged off the colt—he was getting too big to lean on his elders—and moved to the right, not far from Fireweed. Starwort trotted after her, determined to roughhouse. In the same second, Talus saw the red dun’s hide shiver. She jumped into a sprint. Her young playmate copied her. The two raced into the middle of the band for safety and wheeled to locate the danger. Five hungry coyotes milled about in front of Fireweed, their soot-and-cinnamon bodies weaving together as they sized up the stallion. They must have been stalking Starwort, the only horse small enough to be killed.

The stallion rocked onto his hind legs, squealed in rage, and dropped to all fours with enough force to shake the earth even beneath its white shroud. Yipping and pawing at one another in their haste to escape, the coyotes retreated. Fireweed chased them with his head lowered until they were only a gray stain on the horizon. He trotted back to the band with his ears swiveled outward guiltily.

“I should have spotted them earlier,” he said. “Talus, Starwort, are you all right?”

The bay colt nodded, the plash of white between his eyes making him look even more stunned by how close he had come to death. “I’m okay, but I might not be if Talus didn’t bolt.”

“Yes,” Hopsage said, pressing her nose against her son’s neck as if to reassure herself he was still there, “none of us sensed trouble until Talus took off.”

Aster acknowledged her student with her ears. The grulla straightened and lifted her tail slightly. She wished Spurge could see her now. Could see that she had achieved something through hard work, not just physical gifts. Maybe then the black mare would no longer be disappointed in her thundercloud daughter.
In the evening, Aster, Talus, and Fireweed grazed together. Dusk had dimmed the sky to the pale blue of lupine flowers in first bloom. Soon it would deepen to purple and the moon would rise with a liquid halo. As the filly tugged at a semi-thawed greasewood bush, releasing its cutting yet comforting odor into the blank night air, she felt her companions’ attention shift to her. She let go of a branch she had been stripping of its resinous leaves and turned to the other horses.

“What’s the matter?” the young mustang asked.

“Nothing,” Fireweed said kindly. “Aster has good news, though.”

The stallion retreated a few paces so the silver buckskin could come forward. She stared at Talus in her usual calm manner. The grulla searched the old face in front of her for clues but found none.

“You’ve nearly completed your training,” Aster said at last. “I have only one more lesson to teach you.”

Talus snapped her head up in shock. She had learned much from the elderly mare. Thanks to Aster, the yearling could read the moods of Mount Mesteño, control her hatred of humans, and use her bandmates’ unique characteristics to her advantage. More importantly, she had gained respect for life, for its beauty, savagery, and, most of all, its complexity. Yet she was not yet a leader. Unlike Spurge, Aster, and even Thistle, she lacked the self-possession of a truly great horse, the type others followed without thought, much less hesitation.

“How can that be?” the grulla asked. “I’m not ready.”

Aster replied, “You’re right. You’ll have to practice the skills we’ve talked about—and keep growing—before you can take my place. But you know everything you need to know to succeed. My job will be done shortly.”
Talus studied her mentor. The silver buckskin’s creekbottom eyes glistened in the fading light. Was the aged mustang happy, relieved, or sad? The filly couldn’t tell. That made her uneasy.

“When is our last lesson?” she said to decrease her discomfort. “And what are you going to show me?”

Fireweed snorted, amused by what he took to be eagerness. Aster merely gazed at the distant summit of Mount Mesteño.

The mare said, “In the spring, after we return to the highlands, you and I will set off on our final adventure.”
Winter loosed its hold on Mount Mesteño bit by bit. The snow in the barrens dried to a gray shell that cracked beneath the horses’ hooves. Sagebrush and greasewood bushes shed frost with leafy sighs. Higher up, the junipers regained their green flush and the aspens tingled with the promise of new growth. Sometimes, when the wind changed direction, Talus and her companions heard ice rupturing on the river they would have to cross to reach the cirque—it was an oddly hollow sound. In the end, even the upper elevations thawed, wafting the tantalizing odor of fresh grass downhill. The mustangs smelled it and knew they could finally go home.

Aster led her family away from the barrens early one morning. The sun rising to the east made every hair on the horses’ bodies stand out. It also revealed how much cold and hunger had altered the band members. Talus gawked at her friends as they scaled the mountain. Draba had lost so much weight her hindquarters looked pinched and angular. Starwort’s neck had become lank, his withers pronounced. Hopsage walked with her head low; either her skull had gained weight or her muscles had lost their strength. Aster, Thistle, and Fireweed were better off, but they, too, appeared haggard. Reduced. The grulla was glad she couldn’t see herself. Since Aster had called her “beautiful,” the young mustang had become slightly vain. If her chest had caved in or her rump had sagged, she didn’t want to know it.

Yet the horses hadn’t suffered as much as many of the residents of Mount Mesteño. While crossing the sagebrush scrub, Starwort stepped on the remains of a crow, spooked at the snap of bones beneath his feet, and startled the others into a wild-eyed dash through the shrubbery. When they calmed down, Thistle speculated that the bird had died on the wing and plummeted to its resting place, a prospect that unnerved Draba. Later, after the band had forded
the river, Fireweed spotted a black bear still woozy from hibernation. Its fat stores depleted, the animal had taken on a rangy, canine quality.

An even more disturbing incident occurred just past one of the final aspen groves before the ascent to the cirque. As soon as they entered the trees, the mustangs crinkled their muzzles in disgust. The cloying scent of decay thickened the air like wet heat. Something had died there earlier in the season, been preserved in snow until the weather improved, and was now free to rot.

For a moment all seven horses stiffened. Then the wind shifted, blowing the smell directly into Talus's face. Even with her nostrils narrowed to fleshy teardrops, the grulla detected something equine in the scent—a faint grassiness. Horror accelerated her pulse and shortened her breath. She didn't dare push deeper into the grove. It was bad enough to see the decomposed bodies of deer and pronghorn—no mustang can help but identify with other hooved creatures. The sight of a maggot-ridden stallion, mare, or, worse, foal...It could not be endured.

“What's the matter?” Draba asked, coming up beside her sibling. “I know that carcass smells terrible, but it's probably just a—”

The dunalino recognized the odor before finishing her sentence. She jumped sideways, her ears pinned, her eyes huge, her teeth bared. Starwort heard the drumming of her feet and spooked as well. In an instant, the entire family was in motion.

Aster, mistaking the panic behind her for fear of a predator, galloped straight through the trees, toward the source of the stench. Talus and her bandmates had to follow. The grulla wove in and out of the aspens at top speed, threatening to clip heels with Hopsage. To the right, Fireweed nipped Draba into an all-out sprint. To the left, a dark shape loomed. It gained definition as the horses advanced. Talus cantled her head to avoid looking at it, but she spotted a leg pulled taut by
rigor mortis as she passed the object. A second later, she burst into the open and gasped for air. She hadn’t realized she was holding her breath.

The mustangs slowed to a trot. No one spoke for a few minutes. Talus’s lungs smarted. She felt as if she had swallowed cold fire. Next to her, Draba wheezed and lashed her tail. Fireweed snorted to expel the stink from his nose.

Finally Starwort said, “Who was that, Mother?”

“I don’t know,” Hopsage said, nuzzling her son. “I ran by too fast—and I’m not going back to find out.”

Thistle glanced over her withers to join the conversation. “It was somebody large and brown. Maybe the smaller bachelor we met in the barrens.”

“Why would he be way up here, though?” Fireweed said. He paused and gazed in the direction of the aspens, his ears thrust forward with intense curiosity.

Aster halted abruptly and swung her head around to stare at her companions. “Quit it,” she said. “Just quit it, will you? Focus on getting home.”

The horses fell silent and began to scale the rocky incline leading to the cirque. Talus eyeballed Draba. They both suspected Vetch, not the blaze-faced bachelor, had died in the trees. Perhaps Aster did, too. Why else would the silver buckskin order her bandmates to stop discussing dead mustangs? She owed nothing to Vetch, but wouldn’t want to upset the yearlings.

Vetch, after all, had been part of the fillies’ lives since their births. It didn’t matter that neither Talus nor Draba had liked her as much as the other mares. The big brown mustang had greeted the youngsters when their mothers introduced them to the band. From the moment she extended her muzzle to sniff their sleepy baby faces to the instant she vanished in an eddy of snow, Vetch had loomed large in their minds. And she always would. Horses’ first families teach
them how to conceive of the world. It is not possible to lose a member of that original cohort without experiencing, if not pain, at least disorientation.

But as Talus climbed the tower of scree that dropped into the cirque, setting her hooves down on the perilous terrain with an adult assurance, she decided not to think about the dead. The mustang rotting in the aspen grove, the palomino who had probably starved searching for grass in the frostbound foothills of Mount Mesteño, even dear Penstemon, whose body had been discarded by the roundup crew as if it had no more worth than a vulture’s leavings…They were all hairs in the mane of life. Hairs the grulla cared about, but hairs nonetheless. She couldn’t let them destroy her happiness. Not after she had survived such a brutal winter.

The horses entered the cirque with their forelocks fluttering in a cool breeze. Though cold, the air contained a wisp of spring—a scent like the musk of a crushed petal. As Talus cantered to the tarn to quench her thirst and have a long wallow, she knew that her suffering had come to an end. It was time to live.
Chapter 40

Spring came to Mount Mesteño. The winter-grayed bunchgrass turned a soft teal as new blades replaced the old. Long silent aspen groves tinkled when the wind blew through young leaves. The junipers regained their abrasive green finish, the sagebrush sprays their glaucous flush. Even the barrens supported life. When the last snowdrifts melted, exposing the heat-scarred clay, lizards and snakes emerged from their winter retreats to draw strength from the sun.

In the high places where Talus roamed, the season ushered in less dramatic but equally beautiful changes. The sandwort lining the cirque flowered, the north meadow grew back its thin yet nourishing vegetation, and the summit shed all but its most resilient beds of frost. And, of course, the paintbrush bloomed, announcing Talus’s second birthday. As a horse, the grulla did not celebrate this occasion. Still, she had much to be thankful for—the mustangs were in good health after months of hunger.

Their coats gleamed, their barrels swelled, and their strides took on a kinetic quality. The strong, like Fireweed and Thistle, practically shimmered with vitality. The weak, like Draba and Starwort, faced the mountain with confidence for the first time since the cold front descended. Nothing except the arrival of a foal could have improved the bandmates’ moods; sometimes the sight of a cinnamon-colored fawn or a precocious little bighorn reminded the mares of their empty wombs. But even that problem would be resolved soon enough. In the summer, when the females once again experienced the sweet agony of heat, Fireweed would mount them and secure the family’s legacy.

Yet Talus felt troubled in spite of her joy. Troubled because she knew her training with Aster would end in a few weeks. Initially the filly couldn’t figure out why she wasn’t happy
about mastering the silver buckskin’s teachings. She had worked hard for a year and deserved to be proud of her accomplishments. Then one morning, she understood.

The horses were grazing in the north meadow, whisking their tails from side to side. Talus lifted her head to watch Fireweed “fight” Starwort. The bay colt, now a handsome though undersized yearling, needed to learn the skills of a stallion before his bachelorhood began.

“Hey, Draba,” Talus said, laughing, “your admirer is going into battle.”

“Oh, I hope Fireweed won’t hurt him. That big red dun isn’t always aware of his own strength,” the flaxen-maned mustang said.

“Don’t worry. He’s gentler than you think.”

Fireweed arched his neck and scored the earth with a front hoof, filling the air with the rain-like odor of broken sod. Starwort mimicked his elder, but added an unnecessary flourish: a disdainful toss of his black forelock. The red dun feigned anger, approaching with his ears pinned and his muzzle tense. He snorted in his diminutive rival’s face. For a moment, Starwort hesitated. Talus didn’t blame him. Fireweed’s grassy breath radiated power. But the colt recovered, screwed up his courage, and answered the challenge. It was the proper response.

“Excellent,” Fireweed said, his mock rage vanishing. “That’s all for today.”

Starwort skipped, bucked, and squealed until he noticed Draba staring at him. Immediately he walked off across the meadow as if his exploits were a matter of course. The dunalino sighed and returned to browsing. Talus, however, followed the bay with her eyes. The youngster joined Hopsage, who was reclining in a swell of grass. When he thought the rest of the horses weren’t looking, he nuzzled his dam’s cheek.

The grulla glanced about to see if any of her companions had witnessed this small act of intimacy. As far as she could tell, nobody had. Aster and Thistle stood flank to flank, nibbling
each other’s itches. Draba, her stomach full, yawned. Fireweed scanned the area, his attention periodically arrested by the nasal bleat of a bighorn sheep or the lingering cry of a hawk. Talus couldn’t fault her family for missing such a mundane exchange.

She wished she had missed the display of affection, too. It didn’t bother her—she had outgrown her discomfort with loving behavior—but it did reveal the source of her worries. The filly dreaded the conclusion of her lessons with Aster because the old mare was the closest thing to a mother she had. Spurge’s absence had been filled by the silver buckskin, albeit in a slightly distant, stern fashion. When the young mustang no longer had a mentor, she alone would be in charge of her fate. Worse, her relationship with Aster would change. Perhaps they would not be on as good terms. Perhaps they would start to think of one another as regular bandmates, not horses who had shared a string of remarkable experiences. That would be the ultimate abandonment.

Talus gazed across the meadow at Aster. The sky behind the silver buckskin was the pale blue of a nuthatch’s back. The grass at her feet yellowed as the sun rose in the east. Surrounded by so much color, she looked wan. Ghost-like. Only her dark mane and tail anchored her to the earth. The sight made Talus’s heart sting. Life was full of endings.

Sadness flowed from the grulla’s coat. Draba lifted her head and dilated her nostrils as if she had caught a whiff of her sister’s emotions. But the wind changed direction, carrying the scent down the mountain, where it might give another band of mustangs pause before it dwindled to a whisper in the air.
Aster and Talus set off on their last adventure at dawn. They climbed the north wall of the cirque, then picked their way to the summit, their hooves uncertain on the rocky terrain. In the half-light, they could see bighorn sheep winding through scree and hurdling boulders. The grulla admired their boldness. Even the younger members of the herd executed leaps the most courageous horse would not attempt. Once, a lamb, startled by a pika, jumped onto an embankment twice its height without stumbling. Talus snorted in amazement.

“Marvelous, aren’t they?” Aster said, stopping to rest for a moment. “Bravery is their birthright, just as speed comes naturally to the pronghorn, strength to the elk, secrecy to the deer, and intelligence to us.”

Talus agreed. “Yes. I wish I could get over those stones with even half their agility. But why are we this high on the mountain? Surely I’ll never have to guide the band up here.”

“You may. Be patient. I’ll explain everything soon enough.”

The silver buckskin and the grulla pressed on, their pace slowing as the ground grew more treacherous. Talus’s anxiety increased. She didn’t like to feel the earth shift under her whenever she stepped on a loose piece of basalt or sent a small army of pebbles pinging downhill. The climate, too, unnerved her. Somehow the air managed to be both dry and misty, a combination the two-year-old had never experienced before. In addition, the jagged top of Mount Mesteño cast an enormous shadow. When the mustangs entered it, they began to shiver. They might have walked into a premature twilight.

At last Aster halted. She surveyed the area, mumbling to herself, “Where is it? This has to be the right place.”
“What are we looking for?” Talus asked. She wondered if her mentor’s sharp mind had finally succumbed to old age.

“A narrow pass.”

“A pass? Are we going to the Other Side?” Sweat broke out behind the grulla’s ears. She didn’t know it was possible to crest the summit and descend into the land below.

Aster suddenly trotted forward. Talus followed, sliding on gravel as she scaled the final incline leading to the craggy apex of the mountain. When she drew even with the silver buckskin, she propped in surprise. Ahead of her lay a gap a little wider than a horse’s girth.

“Come on,” Aster said. She jogged through the opening and disappeared.

Talus hesitated, her fear of heights briefly returning. The filly steeled herself, closed her eyes, and lunged after her bandmate. Though the ground dropped at a steep angle, she stayed on her feet, dislodging only a few rocks. Confidence restored, she examined her surroundings.

The Other Side was spectacular. From her vantage point a few horse lengths below the pass, Talus could see aspen tree upon aspen tree, their crowns whitened by the pallid morning light. Beyond them, juniper belts added a violent green to the landscape. Lower still, sagebrush gave way to alkaline flats so ashen they might have been made of bone pounded flat. The grulla longed to gallop downhill, weaving in and out of the aspens, junipers, and sagebrush, until she exploded onto level ground. She felt the same squeeze of exhilaration she had experienced as a newborn when she learned the world did not stop at the border of her birth meadow.

“I didn’t know Mount Mesteño was this big,” the filly said, her voice catching with wonder. She glanced at Aster. Was the old mare about to emphasize the importance of humility, of recognizing one’s smallness in the great drama of life?

“I didn’t either, before I found the pass,” Aster said.
When the silver buckskin said nothing more, Talus realized they had not climbed the mountain for the view. “Why are we here? What’s my lesson?”

“Look there.” Aster indicated a mahogany thicket directly under the summit with a sweep of her muzzle.

The grulla examined the thicket. Most often scrubby and stunted, the mahogany had grown unusually tall, providing good cover for even a large mustang like Fireweed. But she didn’t understand how that affected her.

“I’m confused,” Talus admitted. “It’s just a thicket. A nice one, but just a thicket.”

The old mare replied, “It’s a thicket dense enough to protect us from any enemy—including a silver bird. Talus, if I die before the next roundup, I want you to lead the band through the pass and into the mahogany.”

Silence followed Aster’s pronouncement. A cold wind carried the scents of the Other Side to the horses: the clean but mildewy smell of fresh leaves, the dry musk of sun-baked dirt, the sharp, almost tasteable odor of salt deposits, the mineral tang of a hot spring lurking somewhere in the foothills…Talus dilated her nostrils, sorting through the smells automatically, without the joy that had flooded her heart only moments before. She had expected to receive a final wisdom from her mentor, not be tasked with an impossible feat. No mustang could guide her family up and over Mount Mesteño without being forced to retreat by the humans. Neither Spurge nor Aster had managed to evade the strange-winged birds during the last roundup. Surely she couldn’t succeed where her swift black dam and courageous teacher had failed.

“Aster,” Talus said at length, “I don’t think I can do that. But I probably won’t have to, right? You’re in perfect condition.”
The elderly horse’s eyes glowed with melancholy through her dark forelock. “I’ve lived longer than any animal on the mountain, except for an elk or two. My body could quit on me at any moment. I hope it won’t—I fear death as much as anybody—but I know I’m getting slower, sadder, more tired. And I can sense my energy changing…It’s hard to explain. When I was a foal, I watched a mouse die. He crouched near his hole, motionless yet not at peace. It appeared his life had altered course, was flowing from him instead of through him. The same thing is happening inside me.”

Talus nodded. She had witnessed the phenomenon Aster spoke of on several occasions. Vetch’s once powerful frame had deflated the instant she learned that her grulla tormentor would someday run at the front of a band. Penstemon, too, had shrunk as she neared the end, as if life had substance, weight, muscle. But the young mustang trembled in spite of her comprehension. She trembled because Aster had admitted to fear. Old horses were not allowed to worry about death. They were supposed to accept their mortality, to be ready to leave the earth. Age, after all, had gifted them with insight their juniors wouldn’t attain for many years. The thought of the silver buckskin terrified as she faced the unknown, terrified though she had achieved everything a mare could achieve, sickened Talus. Hurt her deep within, like a bone bruise.

“I’m sorry,” the filly said.

Aster flicked her ears dismissively. “Don’t be. I’ve had more than my share of happiness and sorrow, glory and shame. What else can a creature ask for? Just promise me you’ll take our family here when the time comes.”

“What if I can’t? What if the birds arrive when we’re far from the summit and the humans round us up before we can reach the pass?”

“Then at least you’ll have fought for your freedom.”
“Couldn’t Thistle guide us up the mountain? She’ll outrank me for a while longer anyway.”

“Thistle isn’t perceptive enough. You know that. Only a mustang attuned to the land and her bandmates can scale Mount Mesteño without being captured by the birds.”

Talus knew Aster was right. But the filly still trembled at the task set before her. It seemed impossible that only a few weeks ago she had been worried about losing her friendship with the old mare. Now she found herself forced to accept the death of her beloved teacher and take responsibility for her band’s safety at the same time. The double blow left her short of breath. Gutted, as if she had just flown for her life, a mountain lion’s whiskers at her hocks.

“Talus,” the silver buckskin said, “if anyone can get our family to the pass, it’s you. Besides, I’m only asking you to do your best.”

The grulla gazed down at the aspens, their crowns liquid, even inessential, in the sunlight, the junipers, their vibrant foliage asserting its right to life with unmatched aggression, and finally the gray-green sagebrush spreading from the foothills to the salt-bleached level ground. Once more, the beauty of the Other Side—of Mount Mesteño as a whole—astounded Talus. Her bandmates belonged in this country. She belonged in this country. Where else could a horse wake to an alpine wind as cold and sweet as dewy clover? Where else could she gallop over springy bunchgrass and shifting gravel, through lush, colorful wildflowers and shrubs as brittle as fossilized bone? Where else could she fall asleep beneath the very stars her dam and her granddam and her great-granddam had also loved? Surely the young mustang could at least try to reach the pass and preserve her friends’ freedom.

“I’ll take them here if I have to—and if I can,” Talus said at last.

Aster replied, “Thank you. I’ll be able to die more easily now.”
The filly had never discussed death with Spurge. But she sensed it would be okay to broach the subject with Aster. “What do you think happens after we’re gone?” she asked. “Will we know ourselves? Feel ourselves?”

“Who can say?”

“Well, then, what do you hope happens?”

The silver buckskin hesitated, flaring her nostrils as if she could find an answer to her pupil’s question in the dark odor of the earth. “I hope to see my foals again. To wash their soft, sleepy faces with my tongue as I did when they were born. I also hope for something…new. Something totally different from life here.”

“An adventure.”

“Exactly. I’d like to leave my hoofprints in soil no horse has trod before, to listen to sounds no horse has heard before, to taste and smell and touch an unfamiliar but wonderful place.”

Talus’s heart opened with discovery. The grulla had expected Aster to simply want more Mount Mesteño. More scree. More tarns. More cirques. More bushtit chatter and bighorn acrobatics and antlers rubbed of velvet. Yet novelty was equally appealing. The thought of entering an alien world filled Talus with a joyous fright. For a moment she forgot her grief at Aster’s imminent passing and her terror of guiding the band to the mahogany thicket. But somewhere far below, a magpie called, its bright, clattering voice rising in the still mountain air. The bird sounded so sure of itself, so confident in its own youth, that Talus couldn’t stop herself from comparing it to her aging mentor.

“I wish you the best on your next journey,” the grulla said sadly.
“As I wish you the best on this journey,” Aster said. “Let’s change the subject, though. Maybe I’ll live another year. Maybe I won’t. Either way, I’m going to enjoy my final days.”

“You’ll spend some of them with me, right?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

Talus switched her tail in embarrassment. “You don’t have any more lessons for me."

“That doesn’t mean you’re no longer important to me. I wasn’t going to tell you—I thought it would make you uncomfortable—but since you began your training, I haven’t dreamed about my little ones. I used to see them every night. They would always be grazing together even though only my dun filly Cliffbrake and my bay colt Groundsmoke were in the same band. I would nicker, but they would never hear me. My blaze-faced daughter Phlox would lift her head as if listening to a whisper in the grass, then continue to feed. It was agony not to be able to communicate with them, to ask how they had been all these years. Whether they had missed me. Blamed me for their captures or deaths.

“But after I took you to the summit to practice listening to the mountain, my foals no longer browsed their way into my dreams. They didn’t vanish. I still felt them in my heart. I just stopped thinking about them so much. About what they never got to experience or achieve. I owe that to you. You gave me a reason to focus on the living. And while there’s breath in my old body, I’ll be at your side.”

Talus wanted to thank the silver buckskin for her kindness, patience, and wisdom. For revealing the secrets of Mount Mesteño. For easing the pain of the roundup. For filling Spurge’s absence with a different yet similarly nurturing energy. But when the grulla tried to speak, her throat closed, sealed off by emotion. Instead, she nuzzled Aster and went back to admiring the Other Side. The magpie called again, launched itself from its perch, and flew downhill into the
sagebrush. From the pass, it looked like a winged seed with black, white, and turquoise trim. Talus, certain that the elderly mustang understood her sentiments, did not regret her reticence. Only later, after the tragedy, would she wish she had found her voice.

“Come,” Aster said, breaking the silence as though it were as insignificant as a thin pane of ice, “Fireweed will worry if we don’t return soon. Besides, I’m getting hungry. A trip to the north meadow sounds pretty good right now.”

Talus agreed with her ears. The grass in the highlands was not as succulent as the forage in her sire’s range, but it tasted wonderful compared to the shrubbery the horses had relied upon during the winter. The two began the walk home to the cirque, where their bandmates, no doubt eager for breakfast as well, anticipated their arrival. As they crested the mountain and descended into familiar territory, they passed life form after life form. A party of deer had replaced the bighorn sheep; the animals’ spring coats, the pale orange of a buckeye nut’s “pupil,” brightened in the sunlight. Farther south, ragwort lent verdant swards a yellow patina. Once a rabbit darted across Talus’s path, the fuzzy white underside of its tail flashing like a shooting star. The mustangs didn’t suspect that Death followed them on noiseless hooves. Aster was not approaching her end at a trot. She was galloping toward it with her mane and tail whipping in the wind.
Rain started to fall late in the afternoon. At first the horses weren’t alarmed. Intense yet brief storms often doused Mount Mesteño in the spring, throwing a thin blue mist over the land and lowering the temperature by up to thirty degrees. But it soon became clear that the current downpour had more than the average staying power. Enormous clouds blotted out the sun, draining the earth of color. Light green vegetation turned gray. Dark green vegetation turned black. The already wan sandwort blossoms lining the cirque glowed an unnatural white. Even the mustangs looked different. Their water-darkened coats clung to their bodies as tightly as fresh snakeskin, making them look part reptile. At one point, Talus spooked at the sight of Draba. In the gloom, the dunalino blazed with a milky radiance, transformed into something not only coldblooded, but albino.

When the rain showed no signs of letting up, the horses decided to take refuge under the stone outcrop in the northwest corner of their range. They climbed out of the cirque into terrain even more treacherous than the scree-littered path to the mahogany thicket. Her eyes so full of water she thought they might change into liquid and roll down her face, Talus struggled to find purchase on the slick ground. Rocks disturbed by her errant hooves pelted Draba and Fireweed. Sod crumbled beneath her weight without warning. A few times her forelegs gave way so suddenly her muzzle struck the earth, leaving her with a tepid porridge of gore, gravel, and blood oozing from her nostrils.

The grulla’s bandmates were no better off. Starwort dropped to his knees every other step. Eventually Hopsage had him walk directly in front of her; when he fell, she pushed him upright with a thrust of her head. Farther up the mountain, Thistle kept miring her feet in
quicksand-like mud. Aster, too, floundered, her movements as woozy as those of a newborn not yet steadied by its first meal. If Talus could have seen her companions from a distance, she would not have recognized them. The mustangs she knew didn’t fight for their footing. They flowed across the land with ease that bordered on arrogance, a living stream carving its bed into whatever country it fancied.

Finally, dirty, drenched, and exhausted, the horses reached their destination. The outcrop, jutting from Mount Mesteño like an age-grayed tooth, had always unnerved Talus. Now, even obscured by dark sheets of rain, it looked as beautiful as the most placid alpine meadow. The filly snorted with relief and followed Hopsage into the lee of the protuberance. Immediately she began to shiver. Convulsions surged from her withers to her rump until her whole body shook with a wet canine frenzy. The same impulse gripped the rest. Before long silver beads of water flew through the air.

“We’ve never experienced a storm this bad,” Draba said to Talus. The dunalino’s light coat was drying in tufts, giving her the ruffled appearance of a tongue-washed foal.

“I haven’t either,” Thistle said, “and I’ve survived more springs than both of you put together. Why, I’m so filthy I could pass for bay!”

Fireweed, tossing his sodden forelock out of his eyes, said, “Things could be worse. We’d really be in for it if this were a thunderstorm. My grandsire got hit by a bolt of—”

“Don’t scare Starwort!” Hopsage cried, lashing her black tail.

Aster seized control of the conversation. “Starwort is a yearling. He doesn’t need to be protected anymore. Fireweed’s right. We’re safe for the present, but the second we hear thunder…”
Talus pinned her ears and flirted her mane. Penstemon had discovered young Currant by the lightning-struck corpse of her dam. Yet surely such tragedies were rare. Draba, likely thinking of the old chestnut and the strawberry roan as well, glanced at her sister nervously.

Aster must have noticed the fillies’ discomfort. She added, “The storm is probably at its worst already. I’m only saying we have to be prepared. If thunder and lightning come, we’ll have to get downhill as fast as possible. High, rocky places are dangerous in those conditions. But don’t worry. Rest up and I’ll wake you if we need to leave.”

Reassured, Talus permitted herself to sleep. Beyond the outcrop, rain pummeled the mountain, beating musky secrets from the normally dry, tight-lipped earth. The smell of damp soil followed the grulla into her dreams. She was running through a field soaked by a deluge not unlike the one her band had just fled. And she was happy. She loved the thick, vegetable odor rising from the grass. She loved the color of the clearing sky—the brittle blue of a robin’s egg. She loved the sweet chatter of the bushtits as they bathed in puddles, pitching water over their gray backs. But when she neared the end of the field, the ground grew soft and sticky. Her legs plunged into the sludge. Every time she tried to pull free, she sank deeper, the mud rising to her girth, then her shoulders, then her throat latch. Soon only her head remained above ground. It wouldn’t stay that way for long. Talus could feel the goop crawling up the stalks of her ears. With her last reserve of strength, she lifted her muzzle as high as possible, desperate to keep her nostrils clear. Desperate to keep funneling air to her lungs.

“Talus. Talus, it’s okay. Talus, you’re dreaming.”

The grulla woke to find Draba studying her with a concerned expression. Behind the dunalino, the other horses milled about restively. Aster alone stood still. The silver buckskin
appeared to be concentrating—her old body hummed with tension though her muscles didn’t even twitch.

“What’s going on?” the young mustang asked. “Why is everyone on edge?”

Starwort peered around Draba, the flower between his eyes shining in the darkness.

“Aster says she heard thunder,” he explained, his voice breaking.

“She could be mistaken,” Hopsage said, trying to nuzzle courage into her son. “There’s no need to panic.”

“Not yet, maybe,” Thistle said. The blue roan was staring at Aster intently.

Talus walked to her mentor’s side and gazed out at the mountain. Beyond the stone tooth, the sky was turning yellow. “Dawn is early today,” the grulla observed.

Aster trained one ear on the filly. “It’s not dawn. The storm is worsening. Take a sniff and see for yourself.”

Talus inhaled. Instantly she knew what Aster meant. The night had sharpened since the grulla fell asleep. Oppressively rich during the first, heavy rain, it was now bitter. Biting. Dangerous. Only lightning clawing at the belly of a cloud could release such a caustic scent.

“Come,” Aster said, wheeling to address the group, “we have to get downhill, away from all this rock.”

“Are you sure?” Hopsage said. “We just finished drying off.”

“Wet coats are the least of our worries. Right, Fireweed?”

The red dun recognized his cue and drove his bandmates from their refuge. As soon as the horses had organized themselves according to rank, Aster trotted south. Toward the rear of the procession, Talus fought the urge to gallop. She realized the silver buckskin had set a slow pace for a reason—the faster the mustangs descended Mount Mesteño, the more likely they were
to slip on the sodden ground—but she wanted to leave the highlands far behind. Draba also showed signs of impatience. The dunalino tossed her forelock with such agitation Talus would have thought her sister had gone mad under different circumstances.

“Fillies,” Fireweed said, “remain calm! If we allow ourselves to—”

Thunder cut off the stallion. Talus and Draba shrunk together. In front of them, Starwort reared onto his hind legs. It seemed the heavens had been sundered. Torn in two by a giant, cloud-eating predator.

“Settle! Settle and press on,” Aster called to her family. The sight of the old mare facing the storm without fear emboldened the horses. They moved forward once again.

Over the next few minutes, the weather improved. The rain decreased to a screen of mist, the wind to a swift yet endurable breeze. Talus’s pulse quickened with hope. Even anxious Draba and easily frightened Starwort pricked their ears. At this rate, the band would reach the cirque within the hour. And past the cirque, near the base of the talus slope the mustangs had climbed the day Aster led them to their new home, lay an aspen thicket too small to attract lightning. Once under those trees, they could wait out the storm in relative comfort.

“We’re going to make it!” the grulla cried to no one in particular. Yet if she had looked up, she would have seen the sky change color again. The yellow light had deepened to a muddy green—the harbinger of more thunder.

At last the horses came to the cirque. They would have to run down one wall and up the other; skirting the vast depression would take too long. Without a moment’s hesitation, the silver buckskin broke into a gallop. At first Talus delighted in lengthening her stride. Then Aster accelerated once more and the filly understood the mare was speeding up out of fear, not eagerness. But why?
“What’s happening? Are we in danger?” the young mustang said to Fireweed.

“Save your breath,” the stallion said. “It’s not safe here. Too open!”

Horror chilled Talus’s insides. Apparently lightning was still a possibility—and now the horses were in the middle of a rocky bowl. No wonder Aster wanted to clear the cirque.

The grulla pinned her ears and increased her pace. She hurtled by the tarn too fast to notice the water reflecting the sky’s sickly glow. Nor did she spot the sandwort blossoms gleaming like fallen stars. That didn’t matter. She already knew her world had been altered. Warped beyond recognition.

Just as she reached the end of the cirque and started to climb the south wall, Talus was engulfed by the brightest light she had ever seen. For a second she thought the sun had turned into a radiant mist, then dissipated, setting the air itself aglow. But day had not yet come. Only the storm could have caused this premature dawn. Talus accounted for her bandmates. Fireweed stood to her right, Draba to her left. Both had frozen in alarm. Higher up the embankment, Hopsage, Starwort, and Thistle had also propped. Aster alone retained her senses.

The old mare paused below the lip of the cirque and looked back at her family. A second bolt struck the ground, illuminating the night once again. Talus glimpsed terror on Aster’s face before the flash dimmed. The silver buckskin had lived longer and attained more wisdom than any mustang on Mount Mesteño, yet in that moment she wanted to save herself as much as any horse. If she had kept going, nobody would have blamed her. But she was Aster. Her doubt vanished almost as soon as it surfaced.

“Fireweed!” she called. “Fireweed, get them moving!”

When the stallion didn’t respond, Aster barreled past the other mares and bit him on the shoulder. Released from his paralysis, he pinned his ears, dropped his head, and herded the band
forward. Within seconds all seven mustangs crested the cirque. The sight that greeted them made their guts clench.

The hill of scree they had planned to run down was gone. Reduced to a pile of rocks by the earlier rainfall.

Talus turned to Aster. So did the rest of the rank-and-file. The old mare merely gazed at the rubble, still in the same awe that had overpowered Fireweed when the first bolt of lightning cracked the sky.

“Aster, what should we do? Where should we go?” Thistle asked, prodding the silver buckskin with her muzzle.

Hopsage joined in. “Aster, what’s the matter? Aster, we need you!”

Talus studied her mentor as best she could in the weird light. The elderly mustang’s ears twitched. “She’s thinking,” the grulla cried. “She’s thinking! Let her concentrate.”

As if to confirm Talus’s statement, Aster fixed her bandmates with wild eyes. “Follow me,” she said. “We can still make it to the aspen thicket.”

The silver buckskin picked her way along the rim of the cirque. Thistle, Hopsage, Starwort, Talus, and Draba fell in behind her. Fireweed brought up the rear. As the horses inched forward, setting down their hooves with exaggerated care, pebbles skittered out from under them. Talus tried not to imagine the little stones tumbling to the rubble below. If she took a single bad step, she would share their fate. Would spin until impact. But being struck by lightning was worse. To feel energy not your own pass through your body, violating skin, nerves, and muscle…The grulla couldn’t think of a more terrible death.

Which was why, when the sky yellowed again, Talus flinched. A moment later, thunder stunned her ears. She fought the urge to run back into the bottom of the cirque. To run anywhere
just to make herself think she was escaping danger. Starwort appeared eager to flee as well. His hindquarters trembled like a bird on the cusp of flight. Hopsage spoke to him quietly to keep him calm. Talus wished she could hear the bay mare over the rain. She, too, needed encouragement.

Aster paused and glanced over her withers at her companions. “There’s a large rock extending from the cirque wall,” she said. “I’ll try to jump from the rock to the ground. If I can pull this off, you youngsters will be fine.”

Talus craned her head to see around Starwort. Lightning flashed again. In that golden instant, the silver buckskin leaped off the rim. Her pale coat tawny in the storm-generated glow, she looked like a different horse. Maybe even a different species altogether. A creature spun of ionized air. She landed on the rock before the sky darkened, gathered herself, and sprang once more. As her bandmates watched with pricked ears, she alighted on the damp earth. The impact splayed her legs, but she remained upright.

“All right, Thistle,” Aster called, raising her voice when thunder answered the bolt, “it’s your turn.”

The blue roan, confident now that she had seen the feat performed, vaulted from the rock to Aster’s side with her usual athleticism. Hopsage went next. She also made it to safety, though she fell to her knees upon striking the ground. Starwort followed his mother. He hesitated on the rim until Hopsage nickered. Then he vaulted into space. Talus’s heartbeat slowed as his fragile body descended. Seconds later, he, too, was safe.

Talus stood on the rim and gazed down at her bandmates. They didn’t look small. Just inessential. As if the storm had robbed them of substance. Left them brittle as twigs. Lightning flickered. This time thunder replied immediately. It rolled through the grulla’s bones.

“Talus,” Draba said, “Talus, you have to jump. It isn’t safe here.”
The young mustang heard her sister’s voice creak with fear, pinned her ears, and flung herself into the night. She came down on the rock with fetlock-jarring force. The impact was so great she thought she had been knocked from her own body.

“Keep going,” Aster called.

Talus shrugged off her bewilderment and plunged earthward. Her stomach sprouted wings as she fell. It didn’t stop fluttering until she came to rest beside the other horses. Shaken yet whole, she turned to watch Draba leap.

The tiny dunalino, almost as pallid as Aster in the gloom, dropped like a meteor. Her streaky afterimage followed her all the way to the ground. Talus nuzzled her sibling when they were reunited. Before the two pulled apart, Fireweed joined them.

“Come,” Aster said, while the mountain lit up and rumbled once more. “We must get to the thicket.”

The old mare cantered southeast. Her companions shadowed her. Talus’s heart opened with hope. The aspens shuddered in the rain less than a mile away. If the mustangs could outrun the danger a little longer, they would be fine. Wet, tired, and dazed, but fine.

The band covered the first half of the journey without incident. But, when the trees appeared in the distance, the soil took on a viscous quality. Talus struggled to extricate her hooves from the goo. Exasperated snorts told her the rest of the horses were experiencing similar difficulties. Rawboned Thistle and heavily muscled Fireweed sank into the mud every few strides. Their legs burst free with sucking noises that made Talus think of a toothless mouth. Gradually her frustration intensified to worry. She couldn’t remember her dream since she had woken with a start, yet its images haunted her subconscious.

“Fireweed,” the grulla said, “I feel funny.”
“What do you mean?” the stallion asked.

“The dirt...something’s not right.”

“It’s soggy from the downpour.”

Talus swallowed her response. She didn’t know why she was so scared. Didn’t grasp the dark and murky process that creates sinkholes. Plus, Aster had never led her friends astray. If the silver buckskin believed this route would deliver them to the aspens in good health, it would.

As the horses floundered, the storm gained. Soon the lightning and thunder occurred simultaneously. Talus’s withers bristled in the charged air. A madness entered her. She rolled her eyes, bobbed her head, and lashed her tail. She had to do something. Her bandmates shared her mania. Everyone from nervous Draba to serene Aster fidgeted to release tension. Otherwise the combination of terror and slow going would have overwhelmed them.

The lightning continued to flash. The rain continued to fall. The ground continued to soften. Talus walked on porridge, then gruel, then broth. Her anxiety increased, tightening her chest and pinching her lungs. She breathed shallowly. Desperately. Painfully. But still she said nothing. Aster knew what she was doing. Aster always knew what she was doing.

A quarter mile from the trees, the silver buckskin propped. Her coat rippled with doubt.

“Don’t stop! The storm’s almost on top of us!” Thistle cried.

Aster stepped forward. In a single, slithering motion, the earth fell away. The old mare lurched into a pit. For a second no one so much as twitched an ear. Talus’s brain shut down. The past and future winked out, stranding the filly in a present too awful to understand. In the end, love, not comprehension, turned her shock to action.

“Aster,” Talus said, running to the edge of the pit, “are you hurt? Tell me you’re not hurt!”
The silver buckskin lay on her right side with her legs tucked against her belly. She raised her creek-colored eyes.

“My ribs,” she said weakly.

The helplessness in Aster’s voice rattled Talus. Yet the young mustang was relieved. As long as her mentor hadn’t injured a limb, she would be okay.

The other horses shared Talus’s sentiments. As soon as Aster spoke, they rushed to the pit.

“Thank goodness!” Hopsage exclaimed. “I thought you’d been killed.”

“Me too,” Thistle said, an apologetic set to her ears. She knew she shouldn’t have rushed the silver buckskin.

Fireweed added tenderly, “You scared us, old mare.”

Lightning brought the celebration to an end. The mustangs flinched when the sky ignited once again. Talus and Draba looked at one another, the seriousness of the situation impressing itself upon them.

“Aster,” the grulla said, “Aster, climb out now. The thunderclouds…they’re coming.”

The silver buckskin attempted to rise. She lifted herself into a crouch but could not fully extend her legs in the putty-like mud. After swaying in a semi-recumbent position for a few seconds, she sank to her knees. Dirty water puddled around her.

“Try again! Use all your strength!” Talus called. Rain battered and blackened her hide. She should have been cold or at least uncomfortable. Instead, she felt nothing except the drumming of her heart. Apparently it was the only sensation vital enough to make itself known in the midst of panic.
Aster lowered her head, pushing her forelock into sludge as if drawing some perverse comfort from her wretchedness, and leapt upright with a bellow of pain. Half-white, half-brown, she pawed at the walls of her prison. They were so slick her hooves slid rather than scrabbled while she fought for purchase.

Talus glanced heavenward. In the pre-dawn light, she could just make out the clouds above Mount Mesteño. Only differentiated from the sky by their silver edges, they advanced with purpose. Now and then, their bellies glowed, illuminated by their own flickering contents.

“Hurry, Aster!” she cried.

The silver buckskin scraped at the sides of the pit with increasing desperation—and ineffectuality. Finally, she paused, her barrel inflating as she sucked in air. When she lifted her head to look at her bandmates, her eyes were clear. Calm. Like a brook that flows unobserved through a dense thicket. “I’m going to jump,” she announced. “If I miss, you have to leave me.”

Talus and her companions whisked their tails. They could no more desert Aster than desert their bones or their lungs or their hearts. Especially not after she had gotten them down from the cirque.

The storm crept closer. Aster gazed at each of her family members in turn. At last she fixed on sweet but practical Draba. The old mare and the dunalino filly stared at one another for a moment. Talus thought she saw a promise pass between them. She remembered Aster’s prediction that both she and Draba would play important roles in the group.

Lightning crackled. Thunder bellowed. The silver buckskin backed up as far as she could without miring herself in the waterlogged center of the pit. She pinned her ears, charged, and leaped. As she rose from the mud, her muscles veined with effort, ten years dropped from her frame. She was in the prime of her life again. Strong, brave, beautiful. The most remarkable
horse to ever roam scrub, valley, or meadow. But her rear legs struck the mouth of her prison and she toppled backward into the mud. The instant she landed, filth splashing around her, then settling, she aged once more. Grew even older than she was before.

“No!” Talus said. “Aster, keep trying!”

The old mare rolled onto her side but could not stand. After weathering countless roundups, journeys, and seasons, her faithful body had quit on her. She raised a muzzle oily with sludge to regard her bandmates. “I’ll miss you, my friends,” she said. “May the grass shine with dew and the wind stay at your back wherever you go.”

“Please don’t stop,” Talus begged, though she knew her mentor had funneled all her energy into her glorious yet doomed jump.

“Please,” Starwort echoed. “You were so close. Just try a little harder.”

Thistle said, “Maybe the other walls aren’t as steep. Come over here and—”

The blue roan checked herself. Draba was heading for the aspens. Fireweed went to retrieve her. When he approached, she peeled her lips and bit him on the neck.

“What’s the matter with you?” the stallion demanded. “No one gets left behind!”

Draba planted her feet. “What’s the matter with you? Aster gave us an order. Are you going to obey her or put the entire band in danger?”

Fireweed stamped his hoof to show his displeasure, but Talus sensed he saw the truth in Draba’s argument. She did, too. She just didn’t want to admit it.

The red dun turned to Thistle. “Take them to the thicket,” he said.

“Aster,” the blue roan said as she realized she had inherited the position of lead mare—at least until Talus was older. “Oh, Aster.”
“Try again,” Talus called. She could feel the storm bearing down on her as the mountain lion had a year earlier. Somehow it was worse to be menaced by an indifferent force. The static crawling through her fur didn’t crave her flesh or her bones or even her life but would take them nevertheless.

Aster lifted her head. “Leave me,” she said in a whisper so soft it might have belonged to the earth. “Leave me if you want me to live.”

“I want you to live with me, not in me.”

“Oh, Talus, not even humans last. Perhaps that is all you have left to learn—and accept.”

The silver buckskin lowered her muzzle. Lying in the pit with her barrel greased with mud, her hindquarters shaking from her jump, and her legs drawn to her belly, she looked finished. Ready to die or at least unable to do anything else. Yet Talus found it hard to believe there was a limit to her mentor’s strength. The old mare had stood atop Mount Mesteño with only the sky to steady her, forded rivers that frothed like carnivores’ jaws, and wrung wisdom from the loss of her foals. Surely she could overcome this.

“Come on,” Talus said, her grief turning to rage. “I know you can get up.”

Aster didn’t reply. She simply cried, “Fireweed, move her along.”

The stallion arrived in an instant. “Follow the rest,” he said, tossing his forelock in the direction of the other horses, who had set a course for the aspen grove.

Talus pinned her ears. Fireweed glanced at the clouds—they were approaching with their innards ablaze—and bit the grulla on the rump. She shied away from him. At that moment, lightning gashed open the darkness. Thistle leaped into a gallop; a speedy escape now outweighed the need to tread carefully on the mushy ground. Hopsage, Starwort, and Draba also accelerated. Unnerved by the red dun’s uncharacteristic violence, Talus couldn’t stop herself
from joining the stampede. She gazed at Aster for a fraction of a second. Neither the young nor
the old mustang spoke. They had plenty to say. They just didn’t have time to say it. Why
cheapen their bond with rushed expressions of affection?

The filly wheeled and ran after her bandmates. Fireweed shadowed her. As the two
barreled toward the trees, the air gleamed more brightly than ever. The entire mountain, maybe
even the entire world, glowed a color Talus could not name. It was more solid than white, more
complex than yellow, more lambent than gold. It was energy released. Allowed to act on its own
eccentric and erratic will. Before the grulla sailed into the aspens, she heard a sound she didn’t
know horses could make, a kind of guttural keening. Aster had been electrocuted. Her final cry
lingered for a moment, the echo of a life well lived.
Dawn turned the sky gray, then pink, then blue. In the grove, Talus pricked her ears. Somewhere downhill, a chickadee was singing, its voice as brittle as half-thawed snow. The young mustang listened for a few minutes. It astonished her that something so delicate had survived the storm. Meanwhile Aster lay dead in the pit, her body charred, rigid, and beginning to attract flies. At least that’s what Talus imagined. She couldn’t bring herself to look at the silver buckskin’s corpse. Her bandmates couldn’t either. No one had said a word, much less ventured from the aspens, for several hours.

Draba spoke first. “Fireweed, Thistle, should we return to the cirque?”

The red dun and the blue roan stared at each other uneasily. Talus shared their discomfort. It would be painful to go home without Aster. To see the rim she had leaped off and the spot where she had nipped Fireweed into action and her hoofprints in the mud by the tarn. But there was no alternative. The mustangs couldn’t stand around under the trees forever.

“We might as well head back. Some rest and grass would do us good,” Thistle said after a long pause.

“Okay, then,” Fireweed agreed. “Let’s give the hole a wide berth, though. I want to remember Aster as she was.”

Thistle trotted out of the grove. The others followed. For a moment the horses surveyed Mount Mesteño. It looked as battered as they felt. Downhill, where the trees grew tall enough to be uprooted by inclement weather, several thickets had collapsed. A large aspen felled by lightning smoldered, its pale orange heartwood blackening as flames consumed it from the inside.
out. Uphill, mud and scree mingled, turning the ground into an obstacle course. In the distance, the cirque loomed, lonely without its rock stairway.

“Come along,” the blue roan said at last. Aster would have just set off and trusted her companions to stay close.

As the mustangs neared the pit, they stared straight ahead and retracted their nostrils. The sight or smell of the silver buckskin’s body would have destroyed what little courage remained to them.

Yet, as Talus passed the pit, the urge to take a last look at her mentor seized her. She pulled up abruptly.

“Keep moving,” Fireweed said, lowering his head and baring his teeth. “You don’t want to see her like that, anyway.”

The grulla dug her hooves into the sodden earth. “No, but I do want to see her,” she said.

Stallion and filly glowered at each other, his desire to get the band to the cirque for much needed rest matched against her need to say goodbye. After a moment, the flames in Fireweed’s eyes wavered, dwindled, and guttered out. Pain shimmered in the darkness left behind. Talus shuddered. She remembered standing face to face with Bitterroot in the pen. Remembered recognizing her terror in his pinned ears and dilated nostrils. Why were some emotions worse when shared, some better?

The red dun relented. “Fine. But you’d better catch up with us soon.”

Talus agreed, waited for her bandmates to clear the area, and approached the pit. Oddly, Aster’s body was more disfigured yet less horrifying than the young mustang expected. Mottled by electricity, corkscrewed by rigor mortis, and browned by mud, it should have repulsed Talus. Instead, it filled her with tenderness so sharp she longed to jump down beside it. To lick its cold
eyes and nuzzle its cold cheeks and smell its cold withers. To thank it for allowing her to meet its remarkable passenger. But she didn’t know whether she could leap from the slippery grave.

Fireweed would not be pleased if she got herself stuck.

And so the grulla merely stared at the corpse. The chickadee began to sing again. A jay joined in, its harsh *weep weep weep* muffling the sweet voice of its musical adversary. Talus’s ears twitched. She listened to the morning chorus without an emotional or even conscious reaction. The only thing she registered was loss. In her mind, Aster scaled the summit of Mount Mesteño, paused with the wind whipping her mane into a charcoal tangle, and crossed over to the Other Side. This time she hadn’t just gone to the mahogany thicket. She had disappeared.

Higher up the mountain, Fireweed nickered. Talus turned and jogged after her bandmates. Her legs felt graceless. Heavy. Unfamiliar. She slowed to a walk. It didn’t matter. All the horses were exhausted. Someone—probably Draba, who had started to wheeze—would fall back long before Talus lost contact with the group.

As the grulla plodded along, anger displaced her grief. The rest of the mustangs had betrayed Aster. Draba had instigated the rush for the trees, Thistle had expedited it, and Fireweed had enforced it. Only she, Talus, had stayed by the old mare until the end. Only she, Talus, had been bullied into desertion. Her rump still smarted where the red dun had bitten her. She would never forgive him. She would never forgive any of them.

“Cowards,” the two-year-old muttered to herself. “Aster wouldn’t have abandoned any of you.”

Talus knew that wasn’t true. Aster would have acted in the interest of the band as a whole. Aster had always acted in the interest of the band as a whole. Doing so required a certain coldness. The grulla recalled the old mare’s scorn for Vetch and indifference to the palomino
filly. No horse, it seemed, could be only gentle. Only wise. But Talus had never seriously doubted her mentor’s goodness. Confusion settled on her like a cloud of gnats. Confusion, and a realization.

Aster wasn’t perfect. She was complicated. She had been up to—and even during—the moment of death. Yet Talus still loved her just as much as before. So what if the silver buckskin sometimes met suffering with ruthlessness instead of compassion? She had also run back into the cirque when Fireweed froze and looked at Double Sight with wonder and taught a guilt-ridden filly to accept herself. Every living being dragged a comet’s tail of cruelty, kindness, self-absorption, and generosity behind it as it arched toward oblivion. Every living being was more complex than it appeared.

Besides, Talus had bigger problems to worry about. As her anger ebbed away, she started to contemplate her own role in Aster’s passing. She, not Thistle or Hopsage or Draba, had sensed danger underhoof and said nothing. If only she had voiced her concerns. If only she had not trusted Fireweed when he assured her the ground was simply wet. But how could she have anticipated that terrible instant when the earth slipped out from under the old mare? Even now the young mustang could barely comprehend it.

“It wasn’t my fault,” she said aloud. “It wasn’t my fault. Was it?”

No answer came. Not from within Talus. Not from Mount Mesteño. The silence made the grulla shake. She couldn’t bear to be the cause of another death. Couldn’t bear to count Aster among her victims. Already the silver buckskin roamed the same dim meadow in Talus’s mind as Bitterroot and Penstemon. It was the provenance of the betrayed.

“Veer east,” Fireweed called.
The young mustang lifted her head. Thistle had changed course to avoid the pile of rubble at the foot of the cirque. Talus followed her bandmates at a distance. She was in no hurry to get home. To graze and groom and sleep as if nothing had happened. In fact, she wanted to run in the opposite direction. Perhaps, if she stole off when the others weren’t paying attention—

The horses reached a relatively shallow portion of the cirque before Talus could execute her escape plan. They climbed to the rim and let gravity carry them down to the tarn. Immediately Draba, winded, flopped onto her side. Starwort joined her. The rest looked about in sorrow. Lightning had scored the gravelly soil in several places during the night. A giant stag might have rubbed his antlers against the earth until they shed their velvet in bloody ribbons.

That wasn’t the extent of the destruction. Rain had drowned the delicate white flowers mixed with the groundcover. Petals collected in tiny ponds like scum. The sight depressed Talus. But the worst damage inflicted by the storm couldn’t be seen—the cirque no longer smelled of horses. And only the living had the chance to impart their unique odors to the land for a second time. In a month, the grulla’s bunchgrass and the dunalino’s clover and the red dun’s baked dirt would permeate the air. Yet nothing would ever again smack of the silver buckskin except her remains, remains that would disappear someday anyhow. Even bones decayed. Browned, crumbled, and returned to the soil, leaving a dark grease behind.
The mustangs struggled to adjust to Aster’s absence. Without the old mare, they felt like an animal that has lost a limb and must learn to walk all over again. It will eventually figure out how to compensate for its injuries, how to redistribute its weight or alter its stride or hide its debility from predators, but it will never be whole. Every morning, it will wake with its bones on fire and its heart diseased. Every morning, it will ask, “Life, why did you betray me?”

Thistle was strong, courageous, and authoritative. Her bandmates trusted her to keep them safe under most circumstances. But they sensed that she lacked the quickness of mind to take charge during emergencies. Each horse had to be a more active participant in the group to make up for this shortcoming. Fireweed, already the family’s protector, took on the extra duty of telling Thistle where to guide her fellow mares when danger arrived. Hopsage forced herself to discipline Starwort whenever he did anything foolish enough to attract the attention of a mountain lion, or, worse, a human. In response, the bay colt grew serious, even sober. Draba scanned her surroundings obsessively, ready to warn her companions as soon as a threat appeared.

Only Talus didn’t rise to the occasion. She had concluded that she was both responsible for her mentor’s death and unfit to gallop at the head of the band. If she behaved as stupidly as usual with everybody depending on her, the consequences would be terrible. Worse than Bitterroot’s capture, Penstemon’s breakdown, and Aster’s muddy passing put together. It was better to abandon her goal of becoming a leader.

The decision depressed Talus. She spent hours analyzing her foalhood. Memory after memory validated her desire to emulate her dam. Spurge evaded the bachelors, her ears pinned,
her eyes agleam, her tail snapping in the wind. The grulla vowed to be just as fast and brave one day. Lupine charged through snow-encrusted sagebrush, unable to catch the filly he had heard described as “the most promising youngster on the mountain.” Aster’s creek-brown eyes glowed with approval as Talus revealed that she had destroyed the pen. “Your daughter,” the silver buckskin said to the black mare, “has a good soul.” All the major events in the young mustang’s first year had either set her sights on greatness or singled her out as special. What good had it done? She wished she could be reborn as a different horse with different dreams.

The others noticed Talus’s dejection yet did nothing. They assumed she would recover from the shock of Aster’s death on her own. Draba alone recognized that the grulla was in a bad way. But the sisters hadn’t spoken since the storm. Talus hadn’t forgiven the dunalino for leading the band from the pit. Finally, at the end of spring, after the pollen lost its sharpness and the nighthawks returned to Mount Mesteño, the fillies could no longer remain silent.

It was late in the afternoon. Thistle had taken the band to the field of wildflowers west of the cirque. It was late in the afternoon. The paintbrush darkened to a rich purple reminiscent of heartblood as the light faded. Talus stood by herself, listening to the sounds of the day gradually give way to the sounds of the evening. The silvery purring of a cedar waxwing surrendered to the throaty stammer of a great-horned owl, the petulant bleating of a bighorn sheep to the soft tread of a deer, the high-pitched prattle of a squirrel to the bright bark of a coyote. This auditory changing of the guard never failed to fill the grulla with a sense of mystery. A thousand life-or-death struggles occurred every night while she slept. Teeth glistened, claws flashed, and tiny, tremulous things drew tiny, tremulous last breaths. Yet, in the morning, the horses were none the wiser.
“Talus,” Draba said, approaching with her ears pricked to show good will, “are you okay?”

The young mustang flinched at her sister’s voice. “Oh! You startled me. Yes, I’m fine. I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

“About everything that happens without my knowing.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Draba stamped her feet and swished her tail. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she cried.

“It means,” Talus said, selecting her words with cold precision, “you only care about the practical. As long as you’re safe, honor and loyalty and love don’t matter.”

“Are you talking about Aster?”

“Are you as dumb as you are unfeeling?”

The fillies glowered at each other. For a moment, in spite of all they had overcome together, Talus hated Draba. Hated her large eyes, wispy mane, and frail body. Hated everything that made her seem gentle, that masked the cruelty at her core.

“I did what Aster wanted. What she knew was best for the group—and for her,” the dunalino said, voice quiet yet clipped with anger.

Talus tensed as she remembered the silver buckskin lying in the mud. “She didn’t know what was best for her. She was hurt and tired and scared. But you left her anyway. You left her, and then the rest followed.”
I didn’t have a choice. Neither did Thistle or Hopsage or Starwort. Why can’t you see that? Aster’s death was an accident. Nothing more. Nothing less. There’s no one to blame this time. Don’t go looking for a culprit. You’ll drive yourself crazy.”

The grulla’s rage thinned and vanished like snow in the sun. A familiar sensation replaced it: guilt. “I don’t need to go looking for a culprit. I have a culprit. Right here.”

Draba flattened her ears. “Even if I had stayed at the pit, Aster would have died. Besides, Fireweed and Thistle were the ones who—”

“I know!” Talus cried suddenly. “I know. It was my fault. It was all my fault.”

The young mustang turned away in shame. On the opposite end of the field, Fireweed and Starwort practiced the fighting moves so essential to stallions. In the encroaching gloom, the red dun looked brown, the bay black.

“Talus,” Draba said softly, “how could it be your fault?”

The grulla faced her sister again. “I could tell something was wrong, but I didn’t speak up.”

“I could tell something was wrong, too. Everybody could. The sky was breaking apart above us.”

“But the ground…it felt off to me. I should have warned her.”

“Warned her about what? You couldn’t have predicted the earth would go out from under her.”

Talus recognized the truth in Draba’s words. Recognized that the current situation had little in common with the roundup. Yet she couldn’t bring herself to believe she was innocent.

“Draba,” the filly said after a pause, “do you think Thistle is a good lead mare?”
The dunalino pawed at a clump of paintbrush to hide her discomfort. “I like Thistle. I respect her.”

“But is she a strong leader?”

“Well, she’s no Aster. No Spurge either. I suppose she’ll improve with experience, though.”

Talus blew air through her nose in relief. As long as Thistle could be relied upon, the grulla didn’t have to fulfill the destiny Aster had planned for her.

Draba’s muzzle tightened—a sign of suspicion. “Why do you ask?” she said.

Talus tossed her forelock from her eyes and gazed at her sister with a grave expression. Overhead, a nighthawk called. Its wild complaint lingered. Comprehension pricked Draba’s ears.

“You can’t throw away your training,” the dunalino said. “Aster wouldn’t want that.”

Talus replied sadly, “She doesn’t want anything anymore. She’s dead.”

“Her teachings have value.”

“Not entrusted to me.”

The nighthawk called again. Draba looked up, the muscles in her face quivering. Perhaps the noise summoned memories of Larkspur’s range. Of the valley and the juniper belt and the riparian meadow. Of mothers both fillies still revered. Still wanted to imitate.

“I’m sorry. I know you dreamed of becoming my confidante. My advisor. My Milfoil. I know we were supposed to be a team to rival our dams. But I’m not brave like Spurge or wise like Aster. I wish you had my speed and power. You’d make better use of it,” the grulla said at length.

“No, I wouldn’t,” Draba protested. “Aster chose you for a reason.”
“So what? From now on, I’m not going to put myself in a position of responsibility. In a position to hurt my bandmates.”

“Talus, please don’t give up. You’ve been through worse than this.”

“It isn’t giving up when you have nothing to give. For once, just let me live and die quietly. Just let me be average.”

“You’re not average! You’re Spurge’s daughter!”

Talus had already galloped off across the field. She didn’t stop until she could no longer hear Draba’s protests. The dunalino’s disappointment hurt nearly as much as Aster’s death. Yet nothing could be done about it. Nothing could be done about any of it.

“Oh, Mother,” the young mustang said, speaking to the onrushing darkness as if it were Spurge in all her melanoid beauty, “I wish I had been born to someone else. I wish I had been born without expectations.”

A balmy wind materialized. To most of the horses, it smelled like summer and wrung sweet music from the paintbrush. But, from Talus’s point of view, the breeze was odious. A reminder of change. Of endings. It brought to mind loss, not warmth. Nor did it move the flowers to song. Under its mercurial sway, they hissed, seethed, and shivered. The grulla might have been surrounded by rattlers. Even after she returned to the cirque, a sibilance filled her ears. It was the sound of defeat.
BOOK IV
Summer tamed Mount Mesteño. Aggressively bright foliage dulled to a less intense but more sustainable green. Snow-fed creeks lost their post-winter chill. Tart berries sweetened and dropped to the earth. Animals, too, mellowed. Bighorn sheep napped on sun-warmed rocks, their ears twitching as they dreamed. Deer grew round and red and lazy—a condition that would persist until the fall rut. The mountain itself might have been asleep. Occasionally, when the wind shifted, Talus thought she heard some large creature snoring.

The grulla longed to rest as well. It was impossible. She had gone into heat once again. The experience scared her less now that she knew its purpose, but it still irritated her profusely. Her body quivered with excess energy no matter how many times she ran in circles or rolled in the sandwort or trampled imaginary enemies. Nor could she cool down. A wildfire blazed under her skin every second of every day. Not even long wallows in the tarn helped.

The other females were just as miserable. Thistle, already inclined to be cranky, went about with her ears pinned and her muzzle taut. Hopsage developed an annoying habit of biting her hooves. Draba also showed signs of agitation—her silky blonde tail never stopped swinging. Periodically the mares fought without cause. Once, after Thistle bit Hopsage on a whim, the band devolved into a mass of flying legs.

Fireweed and Starwort reacted with excitement. The red dun guarded his mates more closely than ever, his eyes glowing. Meanwhile the bay colt, too young to breed but old enough to be aroused, tried to abscond with Draba on several occasions. One time he managed to drive her to the far end of the cirque before she put him in his place with a kick to the chest and galloped back to her companions.
A few days later, the mating began. Fireweed courted the mares according to rank. First, he impregnated Thistle. Second, Hopsage. Talus’s turn loomed. The grulla had looked forward to consummating her relationship with the handsome stallion since she joined his harem. Yet, in the wake of Aster’s death, she felt nothing as the big moment neared.

The morning after Fireweed and Hopsage procreated, Thistle led the mustangs to the north meadow. Talus hadn’t even started to graze when the red dun approached with his ears pricked and his neck arched.

Talus studied Fireweed. Even with his massive, muscular body trembling with desire, he looked gentle. More concerned about her well-being than his primal need to pass on his bloodlines. For a minute, the grief that had darkened the young mustang’s life since Aster’s death fell away. In its absence, Mount Mesteño gleamed. The sky and the grass and the wildflowers took on a special luster. A kind of hazy radiance. The grulla thought of a reptile exchanging old skin for scales so new they flashed in the sun. Her heart clenched with emotion. Apparently she was still capable of joy. Still capable of love.

“Talus,” Fireweed said timidly, “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” the filly said. She nuzzled him and cantered across the damp meadow. He followed.

As Talus frolicked, her fetlocks wet with dew, her long black tail streaming, she realized that her dam had performed the same ritual with Larkspur many times before, that she was at last a participant in the most ancient drama between mare and stallion. The gravity of the moment sobered her. But then Fireweed was at her side, his beautiful brown eyes bronzed by the morning light. The history of her kind vanished. Only she and the horse she had adored almost as long as she could remember mattered now.
Talus eased to a canter, then a trot, then a walk. At last she halted in the middle of the meadow and lifted her tail, inviting Fireweed to mount her. He approached slowly yet purposefully. His baked earth scent was more potent than ever. The grulla closed her eyes and inhaled. She could have been in the heat-fractured clay barrens or a sunny tract of sagebrush scrub. Her mate, it seemed, radiated warmth no matter where he went.

The young mustang roused herself when Fireweed dropped his head and sniffed her flanks. He pressed his soft muzzle—it had the fine-haired, almost dusty texture of a butterfly’s wing—against her skin with increasing urgency. In response, she splayed her legs, preparing herself to bear the stallion’s weight. He backpedaled, reared up, and leaned on her. For a moment she thought she would capsize; he had two hundred pounds on her. But, sensing her discomfort, he braced her with his forelimbs. After several awkward, fumbling minutes, he made entry.

Talus pinned her ears. The pain was greater than she expected. Yet, when Fireweed set his face on her shoulder and started to push his member deeper into her body, the sensation improved on her. She shoved her hindquarters against his hips as hard as she could without breaking their connection. He nibbled her neck and then her mane in gratitude. Finally, shuddering from his withers to his croup, Fireweed ejaculated. Talus nickered as his semen entered her. On top of her, the red dun sagged with exhaustion. He rested for a few seconds before disengaging.

“When will I know if I’m with foal?” the grulla asked once she regained her breath.

“I’m not sure,” Fireweed admitted sheepishly. “Maybe Thistle or Hopsage can tell you.”

Talus changed the subject. She had forgotten that the stallion, while four years older than her, was also inexperienced. “Do you want a colt or a filly?”

“A filly as strong and fast and beautiful as you.”
“Well, I’d like a colt as brave and handsome as you.”

The two looked at each other happily and returned to their bandmates, who were grazing on the far side of the meadow. Thistle acknowledged the new arrivals with a snort but continued to feed. Hopsage, engrossed in the act of uprooting a particularly tough bull clover, didn’t even raise her head. Apparently breeding had become routine to them. Talus wondered when she would reach that point. She turned to Draba, eager to discuss her strange yet wonderful encounter with Fireweed. The dunalino stepped forward, equally eager to hear about her sister’s experience. But, though the old friends were no longer angry with one another, their relationship had been severely damaged. They each hovered on the point of speech, decided not to say anything, and fell to picking at the grass to hide their unease.

As Talus browsed, switching the odd mosquito from her rump with a lash of her tail, a bizarre mixture of sadness, hope, and panic tightened her chest. She realized that her fillyhood was nearly over, that when she gave birth in a little under a year, she would be considered a mare. The revelation made her mourn for her youth. For the stiff-maned, wobble-legged grulla who had entered the world in a bed of wildflowers only three springs earlier, never suspecting how much she would suffer and cause her bandmates to suffer. Still, being an adult—being a mother—might restore her love of life. She couldn’t quit on herself once a youngster galloped by her side.

Her pulse quickened as she imagined her future son or daughter following her on outsized, uncertain limbs. It would most likely be a hardy, rawboned dun. Perhaps she would name it Broomrape or Goldenrod or Yellowcress in honor of its bronze coat. Then again, if it had an especially bold demeanor, she could call it Stonecrop after the tenacious succulents that grew in the alpine zone of Mount Mesteño.
Anxiety replaced Talus’s optimism. An audacious colt or filly might end up as dangerous as its dam. The grulla would have to teach her offspring humility from the beginning. No foal of hers would dream of anything other than being a decent horse. Less ambition meant less pain, less heartache, less guilt. And wasn’t freedom from sorrow the best a mustang could hope for? The best she could offer her sons and daughters? Talus thought so. Talus knew so. If Spurge had, too, Penstemon would be alive and Bitterroot would be wild. Aster may have died, anyway, but not under the delusion that her wisdom would outlive her.

Thistle led the band back to the cirque in the evening. As Talus followed the other horses downhill, she sensed that her world had shifted. Had reconfigured itself. She had a new purpose in life. It wasn’t as exciting as the one she had pursued before, but it would do. Besides, she couldn’t afford to be picky. Not after she had done so much harm.
As summer advanced, it lulled Mount Mesteño into a stupor. The wildflowers that spattered the alpine zone hung their heads, curling in on themselves as if the sun had dealt them a physical blow. In the middle elevations, the aspens no longer shivered; the wind was not powerful enough to send their leaves into silver tremors. Toward the bottom of the mountain, the junipers shed their purplish fruit and sighed. Even the ever-vital sagebrush relaxed, its contours softened by late season blooms.

Talus welcomed the languor. It mirrored her position in life. Her transformation into a less cocky, less ambitious horse. Just as she had hoped, the prospect of motherhood made her sorrow manageable. She would never stop mourning for Aster. But neither would she succumb to grief. Sometimes, when an afternoon chill briefly woke Mount Mesteño from its slumber, the grulla dipped her head to stare at her belly. She already loved the colt or filly growing within her, partly because she viewed it as her salvation and partly because it belonged to her more deeply than anything had ever belonged to her.

The young mustang could tell Draba, also impregnated by Fireweed, felt the same affection for her unborn foal. The same affection, and the same wonder. Who would have thought tenderness could precede birth? Could precede existence? Talus wanted to talk to her sister, to compare their experiences as expectant mothers, but knew there was still distance between them.

One morning Talus woke with her senses tingling. She looked up and down the cirque. Nothing seemed amiss. The other horses were sound asleep. Even vigilant Fireweed appeared to be deeply ensconced in a dream. His ears swiveled and his muscles shook as he explored
whatever strange realm his mind had conjured. The grulla closed her eyes again. Surely someone would have noticed if there was danger afoot.

A few minutes later, she jerked her head upright. Mount Mesteño was different. Charged by some alien presence. She could feel it in her shins, in vibrations that rolled through the earth, up her legs, and into her marrow. Her pulse accelerated and her skin twitched involuntarily. A spirit of adventure opened her chest. She glanced at her bandmates, then began to creep toward the north wall of the cirque.

“Talus, where are you going?”

The young mustang spun around to see Draba trotting after her. “I don’t know yet,” she said. “There’s something odd about the mountain today. I want to find out what it is.”

Draba lashed her tail nervously. “Wait, you’re sneaking off? You’re sneaking off like a naughty foal? You can’t do that. I won’t let you.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me. I’ll be careful. Just please don’t wake the others. Fireweed will stop me.”

Talus trotted forward before Draba had a chance to answer. The dunalino sprang after her and barred the way. For a moment the sisters didn’t speak. They simply assessed the situation. Talus noted the determined set of Draba’s ears. Only a compromise would break the stalemate.

“Come with me,” the grulla said.

Draba grew even more agitated. “Then we’ll both be at risk!” she cried.

“At risk from what? We’re not skinny little yearlings anymore. No mountain lion would be dumb enough to take us on.”

“Fine. But we head home as soon as we find out what disturbed you.”

“Agreed.”
The two mustangs climbed the north wall of the cirque, planting their feet as lightly as possible to avoid rousing their bandmates. When they crested the rim and jogged down to level ground, they paused for a few seconds. Talus stood still. She could feel the vibrations humming through her forelegs. Mount Mesteño might have had the shivers. The grulla thought of a sick rabbit she had seen in her youth. It lay beneath a spray of sagebrush, its gray-brown body convulsing as its fever intensified.

“South,” Talus said. “We have to go south.”

Draba tossed her forelock and scored the earth with her right front hoof. “I don’t understand any of this.”

“Trust me—I know what I’m doing for once.”

The young horse cantered south. Her sibling followed. They skirted the cirque, passed the sinkhole where Aster quietly decayed, and entered the first of many aspen groves. In spite of her brush with the silver buckskin’s corpse, Talus was in good spirits. The sky had traded its predawn pallor for the blue blush of morning. The foliage emitted the muted yet distinctly verdant smell of old growth. The summer migrants—flycatchers, pewees, and vireos—purred in the treetops. And, best of all, she and Draba were adventuring together again. The farther they went, the more the tension between them fell away.

“We could be back in our father’s range, exploring with Bitterroot!” Talus called over her shoulder.

“It is fun to misbehave once in a while,” Draba admitted. “I hope we’re almost there, though. Fireweed will be furious if we’re gone too long.”

Regret forked through Talus’s stomach. The red dun would consider the fillies’ escape a reflection on his inexperience as a band stallion. And he would be right—Larkspur and even
Bistort never allowed themselves to sleep deeply. At least not deeply enough to miss the fact that several of their mates had wandered off. Fireweed would look bad in front of Thistle and the rest.

“Well, if there really is something strange about the mountain today, he’ll be glad we investigated,” Talus said uneasily.

Draba snorted, “Sure. He’ll be so grateful he’ll completely forget that his two youngest mares—who, by the way, are carrying half of his first foal crop between them—intentionally strayed from his protection. We really should have thought this through, you know.”

The grulla agreed with her sister. But they couldn’t turn back now. Besides, her curiosity had intensified since she set off. It towed her downhill with inexorable force. She recalled the cold tug of the river the band forded the year before. Starwort almost lost his life then, his little body spinning in the current.

When the fillies exited the last aspen grove, Talus halted once more. The vibrations were getting stronger. They had the distinctive beat of a hooved animal’s footfalls. Yet neither deer nor elk nor horse massed in great enough numbers to make the earth tremble. She glanced at Draba, her pulse accelerating.

“Do you feel anything yet?” the young mustang asked.

“Yes,” the dunalino said. “But what could cause the ground to shake like that?”

They gazed at each other with sudden dread. Only one creature could produce such trembling.

Talus breathed, “Cattle. Dozens of them.”

“Let’s go home!” Draba cried, flashing the whites of her eyes and quivering from head to hindquarters.

“No, we have to find them to figure out what they’re doing here.”
“Where there are cows, there are humans.”

“That’s my point. We need to know how far away our enemies are to protect the band. If you want, you can run back to the cirque. I’ll be fine on my own.”

Draba pointed both ears at her sister. “Look who’s acting like a lead mare. And I’m not letting you face danger alone.”

Talus ignored the dunalino’s reference to her old goal in life. She didn’t see how spying on a potential threat qualified as “acting like a lead mare,” anyway. It wasn’t as if she intended to take an extreme risk on behalf of the group. “All right. Let’s move quickly but quietly.”

The grulla cantered down Mount Mesteño with her eyes bright and her nostrils dilated. As she descended into the juniper belt, she smelled the same fatty odor that she had followed to Willow Creek so long ago. Her stomach rose and rippled. Behind her, Draba broke stride for a split second. They would encounter the cattle soon. The cattle, and their masters.

Talus slowed to a walk. Draba copied her. The horses crept forward side by side. When the junipers came to an end, dropping off to a vast swathe of sagebrush and bunchgrass, they gasped. There were more cows than they expected. More cows than they could have imagined.

The animals—black except for the odd splash of white fur—lumbered through the shrubbery like some awful blight upon the land. They flattened vegetation, flushed birds, and sent rodents scurrying for their lives. Occasionally they whiffed the air or flicked their bizarre, low-set ears. Talus wondered what had roused their dull senses until she heard a familiar noise: the ring of metal shoes.

Moments later, two horses—each with a human on its back—trotted after the cattle. One was a middle-aged gray mare. Large yet refined of feature, she had clearly never run free. But the other, a dun colt, possessed the stocky, coarse build of a mustang. Either he had wild ancestry
or he had been rounded up within the past few years. Talus felt sorrier for him than the gray. He, or at least his blood, remembered choosing his own path through the chaparral. Remembered galloping because he wanted to, not because he had to. Remembered life as a willed rather than directed being. Such memories would make captivity harder to bear.

“What a shame,” the grulla said. “A fine colt like that should be roaming the mountain with his fellow bachelors, learning how to be a band stallion. Now, why would the humans bring so many cows here? Even Willow Creek wasn’t this bad.”

Draba didn’t answer. Talus glanced at her in confusion. The dunalino stood stock still, her ears locked in an upright position, her breathing so shallow her chest barely expanded. At last she faced her sister. Her eyes sparkled with excitement—and profound sadness.

“It’s him,” she said.

Talus tilted her head to the side. “Who?”

“Our brother.”

The grulla studied the dun colt again, her entire body quivering with adrenaline. It couldn’t be Bitterroot. It just couldn’t be. Draba must have made a mistake. The odds against a family reunion were too high. Yet, when the wind shifted, Talus detected the brushy scent common to all offspring of Larkspur. Love struck her like a hoof to the chest. She stepped backward. She staggered and swayed. Her heart seemed to open, then shut, then open.

“I don’t believe it,” she said. “Come on! I want to see him. Talk to him.”

Draba nipped Talus to prevent her from plunging downhill toward the cattle. “Wait! We can’t go up to him while there’s a human riding him. Besides, he might not recognize us.”

The young mustang gasped. She hadn’t considered the possibility that Bitterroot wouldn’t know them anymore. A strange oversight given how much Finch’s forgetfulness had upset her as
a foal. But the once-spirited buckskin had recalled Spurge when he examined her little daughter. Perhaps Bitterroot, too, could be revived. Shocked back to his former self. “We can remind him of the meadow where we used to play or Larkspur’s fight with Fireweed or the winter we spent in the sagebrush scrub.”

“How are we supposed to get close enough to do that?”

“Humans have to rest the same as we do. When they tie up Bitterroot and the gray mare, we’ll make our move.”

“I don’t like this, Talus. I don’t like this one bit.”

“Don’t you miss our brother?”

“Of course! How could you ask me that?”

Talus felt a twinge of shame. She remembered her anger when Draba told her, “Believe it or not, but my mother is as important to me as yours is to you.” Once again, the grulla had assumed her needs took precedence over her sister’s just because she insisted upon satisfying them more loudly.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice thick with sorrow. “I just…I’ve wanted to apologize to him for so long. For the roundup. For the fight with Lupine. For all the tension and jealousy and pain between us.”

Talus turned away, embarrassed by her own vulnerability. In the sagebrush scrub below, Bitterroot and the gray mare circled the cattle, keeping the big, black, living stain from spreading out in every direction. The dun colt moved with the effortless dynamism of his free-roaming ancestors. Moved with the lofty, kinetic strides of a mustang destined to win many mares when he reached full weight. It seemed he had grown into the potential band stallion Vetch had dreamed he would be. The only problem: his strength was not his to dispense as he pleased.
“Fine. Let’s try your plan,” Draba sighed.

Talus wheeled around. “Do you mean it?”

“Yes—but we run back to the cirque the second a human spots us.”

“Okay. I promise we’ll leave at the first sign of danger.”

The fillies hunkered down to wait for the humans to tire. Several hours passed. Talus grew impatient, Draba nervous. The longer they were missing, the angrier Fireweed would be when they returned to the cirque. Already the morning had softened into the early afternoon. Grass tricked out in silver dew dried and dimmed. Birds in full song hushed, then slept with their heads tucked under their wings. Soon the day would begin its slow march toward evening, the shrubs and flowers and animals losing definition in barely perceptible increments until the sky darkened.

“Talus, Fireweed and the others must think something awful happened to us,” Draba said, her coat releasing the sharp odor of anxiety. “We should go home before our bandmates come looking for us. I don’t want them to stumble upon the humans and get captured.”

The grulla said, “I know. But I doubt those humans are in a position to round up anything besides cows. They don’t have winged branches or pens or nameless ones as far as I can tell. Let’s stay one more hour.”

Draba agreed reluctantly. The sisters paced beneath the junipers, stopping to sniff or lick the berry-like cones dotting the ground to stay occupied. At last the human atop Bitterroot drew one of his shrunken front legs across his forehead and called to his friend. Leaving the cattle to graze unsupervised, they tethered their mounts to a tree. Talus pricked her ears. Next to her, Draba stiffened.
“Now’s our chance,” the young mustang said. “Be as quiet as you can and approach from
downwind—the gray mare seems flighty.”

Talus trotted downhill, halting periodically to observe her surroundings. The humans had
disappeared but their skin-and-blood odor lingered in the air. They must not have gone far.
Meanwhile Bitterroot and his gray companion grazed as best they could with their muzzles
attached to the tree by the same strange appendage their captors used to direct their movements.
The grulla shuddered. To a wild horse, a creature that relied upon speed to survive, few things
were worse than having to stand in one place. Yet her brother didn’t seem perturbed by his
limited mobility. In fact, he appeared serene. Where was the bold, hot-tempered colt she had vied
against and loved during her foalhood? Was he dead or simply dormant, suppressed by daily
contact with the most terrible animal of all?

The sisters entered the sagebrush scrub on noiseless hooves and approached the tree from
behind. It took Bitterroot several minutes to sense their presence. Talus and Draba glanced at
each other uncertainly. They didn’t want to startle their sibling—if he whinnied in alarm, the
humans would return to make sure everything was under control. To their relief, Bitterroot lifted
his head and looked around. His eyes fell on Talus, then Draba. For an instant he said nothing.
The muscles in his face quivered as if a thousand emotions were fighting for control of his
expression. In the end, neither joy nor regret nor anger won the battle. Just when Talus thought
his gaze would brighten with recognition, Bitterroot succumbed to the amnesia that had seized
Finch so long ago. Grief squeezed her throat shut. She almost wheeled and ran away, unable to
remain near this mustang who had once been her brother and now was someone else entirely.
Bitterroot’s voice stopped her.
“Lacey,” he said to the gray mare, causing Talus to flinch in surprise at the odd name, “We have company. Wild ones. Two of them.”

Wild ones. The grulla pinned her ears. It unnerved and infuriated her that tame horses had a term for her kind. As if freedom, not tameness, was an aberration, a condition bizarre enough to warrant a new vocabulary.

Lacey panicked, yanking the appendage that fastened her to the tree taut as she tried to put distance between herself and the fillies. “What do we do? What do they want of us?”

“Calm down! I’ll ask them.”

“No, Tucker, no! You can’t talk to them. They’re dangerous. A stablemate of mine jumped a fence and spent a month with a wild stallion. It ruined her. For the rest of her life, she threw a fit whenever her owner saddled her—”

Bitterroot turned his back to the mare with his old curtness—at least he had retained a few personality traits—and addressed Talus. “Grulla,” he cried, “what are you doing here? And tell your dunalino friend to quit hiding behind you. I want both of you out in the open.”

Talus eyeballed Draba. The dunalino, shaken by Lacey’s terror, had retreated a couple paces. She stepped forward when she noticed her sister’s disapproval.

“We mean you no harm. We simply wish to talk to you,” Talus said.

“Why? I have no desire to talk to you.”

“Because we know you. We’re your sisters. My name is Talus. Hers is Draba. You went by Bitterroot when you were free.”

Bitterroot’s face trembled again. He thrust his ears forward and dilated his nostrils as if trying to extend his senses into the past. Talus held her breath, willing him to recall his old friends and old haunts. To recall Larkspur’s muscles humming with pent-up strength and
Penstemon’s eyes glowing with the soft light of kindness and Vetch’s big, blocky frame radiating a sort of surly charisma. To recall the aspens shivering at the edge of the creek-split meadow and the junipers releasing their sharp green spice in the middle elevations and the valley bristling with fresh bunchgrass.

“Tucker, what’s the matter?” Lacey asked. “You don’t believe that filly, do you?”

“Quiet, you!” Talus cried. She couldn’t let the gray mare break Bitterroot’s concentration. Not when he was on the cusp of recovering his identity.

The dun colt’s muzzle tensed like he had eaten spoiled vegetation. Perhaps an unpleasant memory, a memory of winter or Lupine or the roundup, had washed up on the murky bank of his mind. Others would join it—with a little help.

“Bitterroot, dear Bitterroot, think of Spurge and Milfoil. Penstemon and Currant. Larkspur and Vetch,” the grulla said, overcome by the sweetest pain she had ever felt as she remembered her natal band. Her first and most formative family.

Draba also pleaded with her brother: “And don’t forget the basin where Larkspur fought off the bachelors or the valley where we grazed in the summer.”

Bitterroot’s tremors spread to the rest of his body, sputtering down his neck to his withers, his withers to his barrel, his barrel to his hindquarters. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly. A full minute passed before he recovered. When he looked at Talus again, she saw that he had changed. That he knew himself once more or at least was getting reacquainted with himself. The grulla longed to run to him, to push her nose into his mane and inhale his distinctive musk, but she didn’t dare move until he had completed his transformation.

“Talus,” the dun colt said, his voice growing more confident as he continued, “my sister and my rival. Draba, my sister and my friend. I remember you! I remember our band.”
The fillies rushed around the tree to greet their brother. He received them just as warmly. If Bitterroot hadn’t been restrained, the siblings would have romped through the sagebrush scrub like newborns. Instead, they exchanged breath, rubbed their flanks together, and nibbled each other’s ears. Finally, exhausted by their own joy, they drew apart. Talus studied Bitterroot with wonder. He had matured into a fine mustang. Finer than even Vetch could have hoped for. His coat had deepened to the tawny color of a marmot’s belly, his black points to the stormy hue of charred wood. His conformation, too, had improved. Age had pared the fat from his physique, leaving him a sleek and shimmering thing. Yet he also seemed diminished in some vital way. Talus couldn’t tell why, so she let it go for the moment.

“Bitterroot,” Draba said, “what happened to you after the roundup? Where did the humans take you?”

“And what did they do to you?” Talus added, prodding a strange, smooth growth on Bitterroot’s back with her muzzle. It smelled faintly of cattle.

The colt glanced over his withers. “That’s just my saddle. It comes on and off. So does my bridle.”

Talus and Draba cranked up their heads in shock. How could a body part “come on and off” without pain? Without blood?

Lacey took advantage of the fillies’ confusion. She stepped toward Bitterroot and said, “They’re lying. They’re making you remember things that never were. Besides, you’re too good a cowhorse to be one of them. You always listen to your owner, always bear him with pride.”

“They’re not lying,” Bitterroot said, gentling when he saw genuine concern on the gray mare’s face. “Please don’t interrupt us again.”
Lacey agreed with her ears and retreated a few paces. Talus, Draba, and Bitterroot resumed their conversation.

The colt gazed at his sisters for a second before speaking. In the silence that followed, Talus could hear the cattle tearing up the grass and pulping it between their flat-bottomed teeth. She trembled. The sound was muted yet ominous, like distant thunder.

“Draba,” Bitterroot said at last, “you asked what happened after the roundup, but I hardly know myself—and not just because my memory is poor now. It was all so bizarre…so dream-like. The nameless one carried me and Bistort’s foals many miles from Mount Mesteño. We were inside its dank hindquarters for such a long time we thought we’d die in there, crowded together, stinking of fear and sorrow. I almost went mad. Maybe I would have, if that blue roan I fought in the winter hadn’t kept me calm. He was the only one who didn’t fall to pieces.”

Talus looked at Draba. Thistle would be happy to learn that her son had shown courage under pressure, that his innate goodness had overcome his arrogance in the end.

Bitterroot continued, “Eventually the nameless one stopped at a place I can only describe as a thicket of pens because it was like the Stand, only bigger and denser. There were enclosures for stallions, mares with foals, mares without foals, and yearlings. The humans put me and the other Mount Mesteño colts in with the yearlings even though we were still a month away from our first birthday. We stayed at the Thicket until the summer, doing nothing but walking in circles and eating stiff, yellow grass called hay. Lupine became our leader. He tried to boost our morale. Every morning, he would say, ‘They’ll let us out sooner or later. You’ll see.’”

Talus shook as she listened to her brother’s tale. She shook, not because Bitterroot had suffered, but because so many mustangs had suffered. If the Thicket was filled with horses from
all over, not just Mount Mesteño, humans were even more dangerous than the grulla believed. They wouldn’t rest until not a single equine ran free.

Bitterroot said, “At the beginning of the summer, a man—a male human—visited the Thicket. He walked from pen to pen and examined us as if we were his prey. Then he talked to the two-leggeds who fed us and pointed to specific mustangs, including Lupine. We noticed he only seemed interested in the plumpest horses. I had caught a cold and lost weight, so I wasn’t chosen.”

The colt paused and closed his eyes. Once again, Talus heard the cows feeding, their heavy lower jaws moving from side to side as they chewed their cud. Dread ghosted through her body. Beside her, Draba trembled. They both sensed what they were about to hear would change them forever. Even Lacey, who had been trying her best to ignore the mustangs, grew still, transfixed by horror.

“A week later, the man returned with more nameless ones than I could count,” Bitterroot went on. “The humans drove the Chosen into the creatures’ hindquarters. At first, the horses didn’t resist. They thought they were being sent to new homes to be tamed and taught to carry humans on their backs. That was better than staying in the Thicket. Lupine in particular seemed at peace with his fate. He said, ‘See, Bitterroot? I told you they would let us out before long. Be patient. Your turn will come.’”

The dun’s grief sharpened to rage. Fury rolled off his coat in waves so thick they altered the texture of the air around him. Made it firmer, rougher, more raw. Talus inhaled, drawing her brother’s anger into her lungs and allowing it to congeal until she, too, burned within.

At length, Bitterroot said, “Those of us left behind didn’t realize anything was wrong for several minutes. Then the wind shifted and we smelled terror. Stale terror and fresh terror.
Mustangs had been taken to their deaths in that man’s nameless ones and our friends knew it. They started to whinny in alarm, but it was too late. The humans bore them away. They’re probably all gone now. I just hope they didn’t suffer. I hope Lupine didn’t suffer.”

Talus and Draba exchanged frightened glances. Old Penstemon had speculated that humans kill horses in addition to riding them. It appeared she was right. The grulla wondered how the two-leggeds brought down her kin. They had neither great strength nor sharp teeth nor sickled claws. Perhaps they ordered their silver birds to peck the mustangs to death. She hoped this hadn’t happened to Lupine. The thought of Thistle’s brazen young son pulled apart at the height of his vitality and beauty dizzied her. Draba shared her pain. The dunalino pressed her face against her sister’s neck as if the smell of a loved one could banish her sadness.

Bitterroot, unaware that Lupine’s death had any special significance for his siblings, resumed his tale: “Toward the end of the summer, more humans came to the Thicket to inspect us. One seemed interested in me. He kept studying my gait and asking my captors about me. At least I think that’s what he was doing. I couldn’t communicate with him yet.”

Talus snorted in surprise, her depression temporarily relieved. “What do you mean? Surely you can’t communicate with him now.”

“Of course he can,” Lacey interjected, pinning her ears. “Every well-trained horse can. You wild ones don’t know anything, do you?”

Talus arched her neck and lifted her tail like a belligerent stallion. “Be careful what you say to a mustang, especially if you’re tied up,” she snapped.

Draba nipped her sister. “Ignore the gray,” she whispered. “We’re here to speak to Bitterroot, not pick a fight.”
The dun colt waited for Talus to settle before continuing. “The man decided to take me home with him. I was afraid at first, but his nameless one didn’t smell of fear. And he treated me with more consideration than any human I’d ever encountered. He put hay and water inside those weird, cold hindquarters so I could refresh myself during the trip to his territory. He also nuzzled me with his forefeet to calm me down when it was time to leave the Thicket.”

Talus thought of Fireweed probing her flanks with his butterfly-soft nose. She didn’t realize humans were capable of similarly tender contact. Perhaps she shouldn’t have been surprised. After all, Aster and Double Sight had taught her that some two-leggeds love wildlife. That was just hard to remember in light of Lupine’s tragic passing.

“His territory—I still live there—is small compared to our father’s,” Bitterroot said. “But it’s big by human standards. Once we arrived, I was put in a strange den called a barn. Three tame horses welcomed me. They had met mustangs in the past, so they weren’t suspicious like Lacey here. The oldest, a bay roan mare, asked me if I came from Mount Mesteño. Apparently my new owner—that’s the word for a two-legged who controls, feeds, and waters an animal—and another man often herded cattle onto the mountain to fatten them up on bunchgrass.”

“Fatten them up? You mean humans eat them?” Draba said, glancing at the cows with her ears twitching nervously. Talus could tell the dunalino felt sorry for the odd, cloven-hooved beasts. They had even less control over their lives than mustangs.

Bitterroot replied, “Yes. I was horrified, too. Still, I couldn’t help but be relieved that my owner lived close to Mount Mesteño. I vowed to escape and find my way back to our family. Talus, I longed to see you almost as much as my mother. We never got to reconcile after our argument in the sagebrush scrub. My desire to talk to you, to apologize for my behavior, kept me wild for a time. I didn’t forget who I was as quickly as some mustangs do because, whenever I
closed my eyes, I pictured your face. Your grulla coat. Your habit of switching your tail when angry.”

Talus wanted to lick Bitterroot on the muzzle, between the eyes, and behind the ears to express her affection. Only her eagerness to hear the rest of his story restrained her. She breathed deeply to master her emotions, unable to believe that the mere memory of her had fortified her brother during his captivity. That he had yearned for the very horse who had brought about his downfall.

“But, eventually, I grew large enough to ride,” the dun said in a sad voice. “My owner came to the barn every morning and rubbed me until I stopped flinching at his touch. Then one day he turned me out in a circular pen, threw a saddle over my back, and sat on me. He got off right away—I think he was just showing me what it feels like to support the weight of another living being—but I panicked. I bucked and reared and kicked. My owner didn’t care. He only nickered to me. Well, ‘nickered’ isn’t the right word. Human voices are so different from ours. But the sounds he made reminded me of a mare comforting a foal.”

Talus fluffed her mane. She had to do something to contain her astonishment. Humans, it seemed, experienced the same emotions as horses. They simply expressed themselves in an alien fashion.

“After that, he started sitting on me regularly,” Bitterroot said. “Once I got used to the feeling, he taught me how to follow his commands. He put a bit, which I think is a feather from a silver bird, between my teeth. That way he could speak to me through my mouth. His mind and my mouth are linked when I wear my bit.”

Talus could no longer remain silent. “Slow down!” she cried. “You have to explain yourself.”
The dun tilted his head as though deep in thought. Finally he lifted his nose, drawing his sisters’ attention to the appendage fixing him to the tree. “These are my reins,” he said. “They’re attached to my bit. When my owner pulls on them, I know which way to turn. And if he shakes them at me or squeezes my barrel with his knees, I know he wants me to run faster. Do you understand?”

Talus and Draba blinked in puzzlement. The grulla inspected Bitterroot’s reins, following them from the tree to the corner of his mouth, where a shiny ring glittered in the sun. She sniffed it and winced. It did indeed smell like a silver bird, but she had never beheld such bizarre plumage.

“Not really,” the young mustang admitted. “This feather—this bit—talks to your mouth every time your owner tugs your reins?”

“Exactly. Except it doesn’t speak our language. It speaks in pressure applied to my tongue.”

Draba pointed her ears in the direction the humans had gone. “Talus, the two-leggeds could come back any minute. Let Bitterroot finish,” she said.

As usual, the dunalino was right. Talus retreated to allow her brother to continue.

“The more my owner communicated with me, the more I forgot my past,” Bitterroot said. “I no longer saw Talus’s face when I closed my eyes or looked for my mother in every brown mare I met or trembled at the smell of sagebrush. Over time, I believed that I had always been tame. That I had always been ‘Tucker.’ Even when the bay roan reminded me of my bloodlines, I insisted I was born into a world of bits, bridles, reins, and saddles. In the end, only my dreams stayed wild. In my sleep, I still heard nighthawks complaining and aspen leaves rustling and, once in a while, my dam’s voice.”
Draba scored the earth with her right front hoof and cried, “How do they do it? How do the humans erase our memories?”

“They don’t,” Bitterroot said. “We do that ourselves. I’ll probably go back to thinking I’m Tucker after you leave. I won’t be able to help it just as a coyote can’t help but raise its hackles when threatened or a rabbit can’t help but cower when a hawk screams.”

Draba bobbed her head and milled her tail, her confusion intensifying. Talus didn’t react. She knew what Bitterroot meant. Horses who had been wounded by life had to reinvent themselves to survive. Some retooled their goals. Others adopted entirely new identities.

Bitterroot scanned the mountain before resuming his story. His eyes darted from the bunchgrass undulating in the languid summer wind to the junipers bleeding together in the heat to the clouds rearranging themselves into increasingly fantastic shapes. Talus wondered if those images summoned old memories, if her brother saw Larkspur or Vetch or even his younger self in the life all around him. She remembered how she had sensed Penstemon’s presence—or, rather, absence—for months after the roundup. How the chestnut mare’s face had lurked behind every sunset, every flower, every creek whispering its secrets in the night...Perhaps Bitterroot’s amnesia was a mercy. At least the poor colt wouldn’t live in a world of ghosts once his forgetfulness reasserted itself.

“Eventually my owner trained me to herd cattle,” he said, emerging from his reverie with the dazed expression of a nocturnal animal thrust into a bright light. “The task came naturally to me. I paid close attention to our sire whenever he drove a wayward horse back to the group, and, for some reason, my body recalled what I learned from him even though my mind didn’t.”

“Talus and I watched you keeping the cows in line earlier,” Draba said.
“So you know I’m good at it,” Bitterroot said, ears pricked and barrel inflated. “My owner rides me more often than my stablemates because I never let the cattle stray. I’m too quick for them.”

The grulla transferred her weight from hoof to hoof to hide her discomfort. She thought her brother should be ashamed, not proud, of helping humans fatten up defenseless beasts. Yet how could a mustang, especially one with Larkspur’s strength and Vetch’s fire, not cherish the last remaining outlet for his energy?

Draba glanced at Talus, deduced her internal conflict, and changed the subject. “Don’t stop now, Bitterroot. Tell us more about your adventures,” she said.

“Adventures?” Bitterroot said, his mood darkening again. “I wouldn’t call my experiences adventures. But, if you want me to keep going, I will. The worst is yet to come.”

Talus swiveled her ears outward—a gesture of indecision. She didn’t see how anything could be more horrifying than Lupine’s death or Bitterroot’s taming. The thought of an even greater crime against horsekind iced her blood. Still, she felt obligated to hear her brother out. After all, she had caused his misery. “Tell me,” the grulla said at length. “Tell us.”

Bitterroot looked away as if disappointed in her decision. In the juniper belt, a magpie released an ascending clatter of notes and waited for a reply. Finally, the dun said, “When I completed my training, my owner took me to the foothills of Mount Mesteño to herd some cattle to a valley covered in especially fine grass. Another man joined us. A man riding a beautiful blood bay mare. She was in heat. I couldn’t focus on my work with her nearby. We didn’t get the cows to the valley until late in the afternoon.”

“Well, that’s not your fault,” Draba said, tossing her forelock scornfully. “The humans should have known not to pair off a colt and a mare ready to be bred.”
Bitterroot pawed the ground. “Maybe so, but I was the one punished. My owner pricked me with a long, narrow tooth filled with venom. The bite put me to sleep. An hour later, I woke up…altered. Unable to sire a foal. Even though I couldn’t remember my parents, couldn’t remember what lineage I had hoped to pass on, the loss hurt. It hurt my body and it hurt my spirit.”

Talus and Draba trembled, their sorrow for Bitterroot intensified by the young mustangs growing within them, not yet brained or eyed or legged but already loved. Above the sagebrush scrub, in the junipers, a second magpie answered the first, an expectant lilt to its voice. The birds were searching for each other. Needed each other as much as a stallion needs a mare and a mare needs a stallion.

A terrifying question formed in Talus’s mind. “Bitterroot,” the grulla cried, “what are you? I mean, you’re not a colt anymore, right?”

“I’m a gelding.”

“A gelding?”

“That’s the word for horses like me. We also call ourselves the Cut.”

Mount Mesteño blurred and tilted before Talus’s eyes. She pushed her nose into Bitterroot’s mane, not sure if she wanted to steady herself or comfort her brother or both. As she inhaled the brushy odor they had each inherited from Larkspur, she understood why she thought the dun seemed diminished earlier in the day. He was missing something essential, something no equine would give up willingly: a legacy. Every happy accident that resulted in his great-grandparents and his grandparents and his parents would die with him, with a creature who could not even be categorized as a colt or filly, who had to use another word entirely to speak of himself.
Bitterroot stepped away from Talus—she couldn’t tell whether her emotion or his own butchered body had embarrassed him—and gazed at the sky. The magpies, reunited, were gliding east on a thermal, their white primary feathers shot through with light. Sadness eked from the grulla. It made her smell like rain. Like wet leaves and damp earth and the terror of small mammals flushed from their burrows.

“Don’t mourn for me, Talus,” Bitterroot said. “There’s too much heartache in the world as it is.”

“But the humans…they’ve hurt you so.”

“They’ve hurt others more. I can’t complain when my owner cares for me every day. You know, occasionally, when he removes my bridle and looks me in the eye, his face shines with love. Then I get the queerest feeling in my gut. It’s part pain, part joy, part defiance, part eagerness to please…For all he’s done to me, I don’t hate him. I don’t wish him ill.”

Talus and Draba regarded their brother in silence. A cow lowed—a deep, dark, melancholy sound. The grulla thought of Willow Creek, of how she had dismissed the cattle that grazed there as stupid. Now she wondered if they weren’t dumb, but mute, gagged by the awful complexity of their human masters, those bizarre, two-legged creatures who could be at once kind and cruel, gentle and rough, just and evil.

“So that’s it? This is your life now?” Draba asked.

“Yes,” Bitterroot answered. “I’ll sleep in a barn and herd cattle until I die. It will be boring, but not especially painful.”

A madness entered Talus. Her ears thrummed, her temples pulsed, and her facial muscles twitched. She had to free Bitterroot. Had to save him from his monotonous existence.
“We’ll help you escape. How does your owner take this off?” she cried, biting the dun’s reins. The thick, smooth material didn’t fray or even weaken.

“He has many toes on his front feet—like a squirrel,” Bitterroot said. “We hooved animals are less dexterous.”

“I’ll try something else.”

“Talus, it’s no use.”

The grulla ignored her sibling’s protests, charged the tree, and battered it with her forefeet. Splinters perforated her hide. She might as well have run full tilt into a sharp-needled pine bough.

Lacey spooked and pulled on her restraints. “Stop that crazy filly, Tucker! I don’t care if she’s your sister.”

Bitterroot whacked Talus with his large, square hindquarters—a gift from Vetch—just hard enough to throw her off balance. She staggered, corrected herself, and glared at him.

“Why did you strike me?” she said, gasping from her exertions. “Don’t you want to be wild again?”

Bitterroot’s ears flickered. He said, “Half of me does. The other half knows there’s no place for me on Mount Mesteño anymore. A gelding can’t start a band of his own.”

“You don’t have to start your own band. Join ours. Lupine’s dam Thistle and the red dun stallion Fireweed lead our family. You remember them.”

“Fireweed wouldn’t tolerate another male, sterile or not. The arrangement would be unnatural.”

“He’d make an exception for me. For my brother.”
Lacey nipped Bitterroot to grab his attention. Her features both tensed with fear and softened with affection. In that moment, Talus realized the gray mare loved “Tucker.” Loved a horse deprived of his ability to love. Pity warmed the grulla’s stomach.

The tame ones communicated without words for an instant. Talus and Draba could only imagine what shared experiences bound Lacey to Bitterroot, Bitterroot to Lacey. But surely the chance to leap streams and fly through chaparral and explore the wind-scoured highlands carried more weight. Surely even wildness that could not replicate itself was better than dominion.

“Don’t worry,” Bitterroot said, nuzzling Lacey. “I’m not going anywhere. Who would help you and our owners take care of the cows?”

Talus struggled to maintain her composure. “Please reconsider. No son of Larkspur should end his days among two-leggeds,” she said.

Bitterroot replied, “Reconsider? I don’t have a choice. Even if you managed to kick down that tree, I wouldn’t get very far before my owner caught me, not dragging shattered wood.”

“It can’t hurt to try.”

Draba said, “Talus, let him be. He’s not going to change his mind. Bitterroot, it was selfish of us to make you do all the talking. Is there anything you’d like to know?”

The dun gelding paused. Talus sensed he had a very specific question for them but lacked the courage to ask it. In the hush that followed, the grulla picked up human footfalls.

Draba must have heard the noise, too. “We don’t have much time,” she said.

Bitterroot stared past—instead of at—his sisters. “My mother,” he said. “Is she well?”

The fillies resisted the impulse to exchange looks. Suspicious behavior would reveal the truth: Vetch was either dead or alone. Such bleak news might finish off Bitterroot for good.

Talus said, “We haven’t seen her recently. Our current range is so far from Larkspur’s.”
“But if our paths cross, we’ll tell her how strong and handsome you’ve become,” Draba hastened to add.

“Thank you,” Bitterroot said, his voice tight with disappointment. “Will you also tell her that I forgive her? That I understand she was hard on me to prepare me for life?”

Draba cocked her ears in assent. Talus daydreamed, her thoughts returning to the roundup. To the dreadful second when Vetch emerged from her shock at Bitterroot’s culling and rushed to the edge of the pen to say goodbye.

“She called out to you,” the young mustang said. “When the nameless ones carried you away, she called out to you.”

Bitterroot stiffened, his eyes and nostrils dilating. “She did? Were you close enough... Could you hear her?”

“She said, ‘Bitterroot, be brave. Bitterroot, I love you.’”

The dun gelding drew a deep breath and released it in a long stream of air. It was as though he had discovered a secret. A secret so wonderful it would remain nestled in his heart even after his amnesia returned, rekindling his will to live whenever his courage flagged. His spirit, if not his mind, would recall that his dam loved him in spite of his inability to meet her expectations. What else did he deserve to know on an unconscious level? What else might make nights spent in a barn miles from home bearable? The answer came to Talus in an instant.

“Bitterroot, you apologized to me for our fight over Lupine,” she said, “but I’m the one who should be sorry. I was cruel to you when we were foals. Worse, I got you captured in the first place. Don’t you remember my dash from the aspens?”

The dun replied, “Yes. And I blamed you for a little while.”

“What changed?”
“I realized humans always get their way. They’re just too smart and too powerful to defeat. Our band would have been caught whether or not you broke from cover.”

Talus pawed the grass guiltily. There was one more thing she had to tell Bitterroot. “I didn’t run out into the meadow in a panic—I thought I could lead the family to safety. My adventure with the bachelors made me arrogant.”

“I guessed as much.”

The grulla threw up her tail in astonishment. She turned to Draba, expecting her sister to be equally shocked. Instead, the flaxen-maned filly looked amused.

“Talus,” she said, “Bitterroot played with you almost as often as I did during our foalhood. He knows you very, very well.”

The dun added, “And I still forgive you. I still just want us to be friends.”

Brother and sister touched foreheads. Talus relished the strange intimacy of standing skull to skull with her former rival. She applied more pressure. He responded. If only their fur and flesh and muscle would slither from their frames. Would let them grind bone on bone in affirmation of their renewed bond. Their renewed peace with each other. When they finally parted, Talus sensed their reconciliation, like Vetch’s love, had impressed itself on Bitterroot’s soul, on the piece of him that transcended memory.

“Talus, we have to go,” Draba said, quivering on the threshold of flight. “I can smell the two-leggeds now. They’ll be here soon.”

The grulla sniffed the air. Her sister was right. Even with so many cattle nearby, she detected the odor of exposed skin. Fear lit up her nerves. She wheeled toward Bitterroot, the original purpose for her trip down the mountain seizing control of her thoughts once again.

“Brother, why are there humans this far west?” she asked.
Bitterroot stared at her blankly. “I told you. They graze their cows on Mount Mesteño,” he said in confusion.

“But don’t they usually stay at Willow Creek? And with fewer animals?”

“How should I know? My owner doesn’t take me to Willow Creek. Does yours, Lacey?”

The gray mare, less puzzled than Bitterroot, said, “He used to, but there was too much competition. His cattle couldn’t get enough to eat. That’s why he sold his herd and went into business with your owner.”

Talus and Draba had no idea what “sold” or “business” meant. “Competition,” however, was a familiar concept. The fillies shuddered. When cows overran the mountain, their masters blamed the scarcity of grass on wildlife. More specifically, on mustangs. At least that’s what their mothers had told them after their encounter with Finch.

“Lacey,” Talus said, noticing something furtive in the mare’s expression, “are the humans planning another roundup? Do they think if they remove more of us, the cattle will have all the food they need?”

The gray tossed her forelock and snapped, “Why would I give you any valuable information, grulla?”

“Because we’re both horses. Horses who love Bitterroot.”

Lacey and Talus inspected each other for a moment. To the grulla, the gray mare’s face seemed absurdly delicate. It reminded her of a stone smoothed and streamlined by water for generations. Apparently captivity altered the equine form as well as the mind. No mustang sported such a concave forehead, tapered muzzle, and lightweight jaw. Talus thought these human “improvements” made Lacey appear enervated. Pared down. Insubstantial. But maybe the
wild looked just as odd to the tame. Maybe this flighty, bad-tempered creature who insisted upon calling Bitterroot "Tucker" would find even Spurge coarse of feature.

"Fair enough," the gray admitted at last. "Yes, the humans intend to round up many of your kind in the fall. My owner lives near a Thicket like the one Tucker mentioned. I can see it from my paddock. The two-leggeds who watch over the horses there have been making room for new arrivals for weeks now."

Draba cried, "That can't be right! My mother told me roundups only come every three or four years."

Lacey pinned her ears and whipped her tail from side to side. "I know what I know, little dunalino. The humans want more grass for more cows and you mustangs are in their way."

Talus closed her eyes to center herself. Terror sank its claws into her nevertheless. Already she could hear the whir of silver wings, the rumble of pounding hooves, and the high-pitched neighs of foals separated from their dams. What would she do if she lost Fireweed or Draba or Thistle? If she lost her own freedom and, by extension, that of her baby? Death would be preferable.

The stench wafting from Bitterroot’s and Lacey’s owners grew even stronger. Talus shook her head until the sounds of the imagined roundup faded. When the world stilled and settled, she cast about for Draba. The dunalino stood a horse length to the right, her petite frame quivering as her desire to stay with Bitterroot warred with her urge to flee the two-leggeds.

"Let’s get out of here!" Talus cried.

Draba, her inner conflict resolved the instant her sibling spoke, exchanged breath with Bitterroot. "I’ll miss you," she said. "I’ll think of you every day. And I’ll tell your story to the wind so part of you will always roam the high places. Will always be free."
The dun replied, “Thank you, daughter of Milfoil. Perhaps the breeze will carry your words to my mother.”

Talus took leave of Bitterroot next. She licked his cheek while he pressed his nose into her neck. When they stepped away from each other, the filly noticed her brother’s eyes had dimmed. Forgetfulness gathered at their corners like an approaching storm.

“Your name is Bitterroot,” the grulla said. “Your parents are Larkspur and Vetch. Your sisters are Draba and Talus. We all ran wild—together—not very long ago.”

The storm cleared slightly. The humans appeared in the sagebrush. The mustangs galloped uphill toward the juniper belt.

As Talus led Draba into the trees, she heard Bitterroot call, “I’ll try to remember, daughter of Spurge. I’ll try to remember.”

Seconds later, green needles closed around the young horses, sealing them off from their old bandmate forever.
The fillies didn’t make it back to the cirque until the late afternoon. They climbed the north wall in the tawny sunlight, crested the rim, and gazed down at their family. Fireweed stood beside the tarn, sniffing the air for signs of the missing. Thistle, too, seemed anxious—periodically she stamped her heavy gray hooves. Meanwhile Hopsage and Starwort reclined in the thin but soft alpine groundcover, spared from more than passing concern by their lack of rank.

“Are you ready to face Fireweed?” Talus asked.

Draba said, “You know I’m not. I don’t usually break rules…unlike a certain mustang of my acquaintance.”

“I can’t imagine who you mean. Come on. The sooner we get this over with, the better.”

Talus nuzzled Draba. Bitterroot had dissolved the tension between them. Had swept away all the anger and awkwardness and blame left over from the silver buckskin’s death with his presence alone. Horses cannot conceive of giving or receiving gifts, but the sisters nevertheless felt indebted to their brother in a deep, gut-warming manner.

“Come on,” Talus said again. “We can take a scolding. We can take anything as long as we take it together.”

Draba agreed. “Fine, but I’m telling Fireweed this was your idea.”

“You don’t have to. I will.”

At that moment, Starwort looked up, noticed the fillies, and whinnied. Talus pinned her ears. She had wanted to rejoin the band on her own terms. But maybe Fireweed wouldn’t have appreciated being surprised on top of duped.
The grulla and the dunalino plunged into the cirque. When they reached their bandmates, Hopsage echoed her son’s greeting. Fireweed and Thistle simply lashed their tails. Talus couldn’t tell if their agitation stemmed from rage or relief. She faced the leaders uncertainly.

“Listen,” the young mustang said, “you two have every right to be mad, but if you hear us out, you’ll see—”

Fireweed snapped, “No, I will not hear you out. You’ve broken one of our oldest rules. Females only leave the herd to foal. You know that. What am I supposed to do? Watch you every second of the day?”

Talus met fury with fury even though she recognized she was in the wrong. “Isn’t that your job? To watch us? We wouldn’t have been able to sneak off if you were acting like a band stallion this morning.”

Silence descended on the mustangs. An early evening wind blew their manes on end and sent tremors through their hides. Indignation arched Fireweed’s neck so dramatically his chin touched his chest. Talus thought of a snake retracting its head before it strikes. She retreated a pace.

“At least I act like a band stallion most of the time,” the red dun said. “When are you going to start acting like a lead mare?”

Thistle interjected, her nostrils flared, “That’s my question, too. I can’t step down until you show some responsibility.”

Talus stared at the soil beneath her hooves. The sandwort had yet to regain its delicate white flowers. How could the grulla admit that she, too, hadn’t recovered from the storm without upsetting her family even more? Thus far only Draba knew that Aster’s teachings had died with her. That the one horse entrusted with them had resigned herself to a quiet life.
“And as for you, Draba,” Thistle continued, rounding on the dunalino, “why did you let your sister stray from the cirque? I’m sure she came up with your little plan, but you’re usually not dumb enough to go along.”

Talus stepped forward, her courage renewed by the attack on Draba. “Leave her alone. I made her accompany me. Besides, we had a good reason for wandering. There are cows on the mountain. Cows—and humans,” she cried before the blue roan could interrupt her.

Hopsage sniffed Talus’s withers and recoiled. “It’s true! She reeks of cattle. I don’t know why we didn’t smell it sooner,” the bay said.

Fireweed’s ire turned to horror, his horror to adrenaline. “Where are they? Why are they here? Were you able to count them?” he asked, scarcely drawing a breath.

Talus’s ears relaxed, dropping a few inches and swiveling outward. She couldn’t resent the red dun. Not while his eyes gleamed with concern for his mates. “In the lower elevations, past the juniper belt. We spotted only two humans. They had many cows with them, though,” she repeated, trying not to picture the great black stain spreading across the sagebrush scrub. It was no use. The moment she spoke, she saw the cattle. Saw their cumbersome bodies, heavy legs, and working jaws. Saw doom in their blank yet oddly sad faces.

Draba continued where Talus left off. “That’s not all,” she said. “We talked to the humans’ horses. They told us a roundup will be held in the fall.”

Hopsage tossed her forelock dismissively and said, “Never believe a tame one. They’re all liars. Something about living with two-leggeds corrupts them.”

Talus remembered Lacey. The gray mare had seemed just as set in her beliefs as Hopsage. Yet neither was right. No equine could be wholly good or bad. “They’re not all liars,” the filly said, causing her companions (except for Draba) to snort. “And if you think so, you’re
foolish. Anyway, one of the horses was a mustang. Our brother Bitterroot, son of Larkspur and Vetch.”

Starwort glanced at Hopsage, who glanced at Thistle, who glanced at Fireweed. Talus pricked her ears in grim satisfaction—Bitterroot’s lineage had had the desired effect. Larkspur’s progeny were renowned for their stoutness of heart. No colt by the battle-scarred dun would resort to deceit.

The horses said nothing for a long time. They simply watched as Mount Mesteño dimmed. The sky whitened, then grayed, then blued. Somewhere nearby, a poorwill emerged from its scrape and greeted the night with a hollow, lilting cry. Directly above the cirque, bats scythed the air, the twig-like bones secreted in their bald wings exposed by starlight. Talus’s heart ripened with grief, pushing against the walls of her chest in its search for more room to grow. To swell under its own sorrowful power. The grulla sensed her bandmates felt the same way—she didn’t even have to dilate her nostrils to smell anguish rising from their coats in musky plumes. Each mustang emitted a unique odor that mingled with her friends’ until a new, composite scent formed: the olfactory portrait of a family in mourning.

“What should we do?” Hopsage asked at length.

“What can we do?” Thistle said. “If the humans want to capture us, they will—no matter how far and fast we run. Let’s just hope we aren’t among the culled.”

“But we will be. Some of us will be. No band has ever returned to the mountain whole.”

“We’ve lost friends and foals before. We’ll survive. We always do.”

Thistle gazed at the bats fluttering, spinning, and wheeling through space. Talus could tell the lead mare was thinking about her son. The filly decided not to mention Lupine’s death. At least then the feisty son of Bistort would roam the valleys of his dam’s mind fully fleshed.
“I hate to admit it, but Thistle’s right,” Fireweed said. “No horse can predict when or where the humans will strike. No horse. And even if we knew the exact day of the roundup, what could we do to prepare for it? We have only one recourse: to make the most of the coming months. To enjoy each other’s company. To savor the sound of the wind whistling between our ears.”

Thistle, Hopsage, and Draba murmured their agreement. Talus looked away. She, too, had been moved by Fireweed’s speech. There was something wonderfully rebellious about choosing happiness in a time of danger. Yet she couldn’t help but picture the mountain pass and the mahogany thicket on the Other Side. The mustangs didn’t have to resign themselves to whatever that ornery old stallion Fate had in store for them. They could gallop to the cloud-wreathed pinnacle of their home in a final, desperate bid to preserve their wildness. Wasn’t it worth a try? Even if they failed, even if every last one of them ended up like Bitterroot, they wouldn’t have to wonder, “Did we fight as hard as we could to remain free? Or did our courage wilt and shrivel when we needed it most?”

Talus knew her younger self would charge to the top of Mount Mesteño without hesitation. Would prefer to spend her last seconds of life as a wild thing racing toward the summit with her eyes stinging and her lungs flaming. The grulla almost obeyed the wishes of the bold, bristle-maned foal she used to be and told her bandmates about the pass. But when she looked from Fireweed to Thistle, Thistle to Hopsage, Hopsage to Starwort, and Starwort to Draba, her throat closed. The horses had more to lose than their freedom. An all-out dash to the mahogany thicket—especially one led by a filly who did not deserve to run at the head of her band—could break their legs or wear their hooves to nubs or destroy their wind. Fireweed was right. Escape was impossible.
“Talus,” Draba said, “are you okay?”

The young mustang studied her sister. In the encroaching gloom, she could just detect the concerned tilt of the dunalino’s ears. “No. Are you okay?” she said.

“No.”

“I guess that’s what existence is—learning to survive when you’re not okay.”

Draba pawed the ground as though she wanted to argue with Talus’s bleak philosophy yet held her tongue. The fillies peered at each other in the murk, then began to graze on the threadbare alpine vegetation. Their adventure had left them famished and exhausted. When their stomachs stopped groaning, they reclined flank to flank in the sandwort. Draba fell asleep within minutes, but Talus stayed awake a little longer. She dared not surrender her consciousness until all thoughts of the roundup vanished from her mind. Many restless nights lay ahead. This might be her last shot at a pleasant dream.
Summer ebbed so gradually and imperceptibly that Talus was startled when autumn arrived. One morning, while feeding in the north meadow with Draba at her side, she heard the piercing, plaintive wail of a golden-crowned sparrow. Usually the song filled her with a welcome melancholy—the tiny birds who uttered it always sounded put-upon but patient. Now she felt only dread. Her hide trembled as though a small stream flowed just beneath her skin.

“What is it? Did you see something?” Draba asked, pricking her ears and lifting her nose to check for danger.

“The sparrows are back,” Talus said. “That means fall is here.”

“Oh, I don’t know. My dam told me aspen leaves are more reliable. When they turn yellow—”

“The roundup’s getting closer regardless, Draba.”

“I’m trying to be cheerful. Fireweed says we can’t let our fear get the best of us.”

Talus gazed across the meadow at the red dun. He stood off by himself, his clayspun coat gleaming in the pale light.

“What do you think he’s forgiven us yet?” the grulla said.

“How should I know? He spends more time with you than me,” the other filly replied. “Thistle sure hasn’t. She nipped me for playing tag with Starwort yesterday. Apparently I shouldn’t encourage him to act like a foal.”

Talus said absentmindedly, “Well, he is a yearling.”
Her attention had returned to Fireweed. The stallion seemed preoccupied. She decided to approach him in spite of the fact that they hadn’t exchanged more than a few words since the Bitterroot incident.

“Don’t antagonize him,” Draba warned when she guessed her sister’s intent.

“I won’t,” Talus said. The dunalino looked unimpressed. “Really I won’t.”

The young mustang trotted through the grass, slowed to a nervous, mincing walk as she neared Fireweed, and halted a horse length from him.

“Yes?” he said, his tone aloof instead of angry.

Emboldened, Talus narrowed the distance between them and said, “You’re worried. Why?”

“I can’t stop thinking about the roundup.”

“Neither can I—your ‘make the most of the coming months’ philosophy is noble but not realistic. That isn’t what’s bothering you, though.”

“No?” Fireweed laughed, his voice warm once more. “And how would you know, little grulla?”

“Aster taught me to recognize your moods. To recognize the moods of every band member,” she said.

The red dun sobered at the mention of Aster. He searched Talus’s face for an answer to whatever troubled him. “Fine, I’ll tell you. I need your advice, anyway. With cold weather around the corner and foals due in less than a year, I don’t like our chances up here. I want to take the band east, to Bistort’s old range. The forage is better in that part of the mountain and my mates deserve the best, most nutritious food while they’re pregnant.”
His eyes dropped to the filly’s barrel where, in the fetid darkness of her womb, something that did not yet resemble a mustang inched toward life. Talus switched her tail, self-conscious and, oddly, envious of her unborn baby. The thing wouldn’t make its debut on Mount Mesteño for another nine months but it had already usurped her. “Fireweed, Aster chose the cirque because it’s safe. Because it’s private. There are no other horses within ten miles. If we relocate to Bistort’s territory, we’ll have to contend with Larkspur. Well, you will.”

“I’m as strong as he is…or at least strong enough to win his respect. To convince him to leave my family alone.”

Talus stepped back, cocked her head, and examined the stallion. He wasn’t as burly as her sire. The battle-scarred dun had such an ample girth he appeared earthbound at rest (an illusion that had cost many of his opponents dearly). Otherwise, the two were well-matched.

“I guess so,” the grulla admitted. “Have you talked to Thistle about this?”

Fireweed lifted his head and flirted his mane, pleased to be deemed the equal of Larkspur. “Not yet. Your opinion carries more weight with me—even though you and Draba behaved like fools the day you ran off after your brother.”

“Thistle’s the lead mare. I’m only a two-year-old.”

“Only a two-year-old? You’re the future of our band. Thistle’s temporary. A stand-in. All the same, I intend to speak to her and everyone else before I settle on a course of action.”

Talus excused herself and rejoined Draba. The dunalino quit picking at a tuft of semi-stale grass.

“What happened? He wasn’t upset with you, was he?” she said.

“No, he’s over our disobedience,” the young mustang said. “But he thinks we should move to Bistort’s range.”
Draba’s expression brightened. She had never grown to love the high places. “That’s wonderful! We’ll be so close to our foalhood haunts. Maybe we’ll see our dams and siblings, too. I hope Gentian remembers her big sister.”

“I’m sure she will.”

The grulla wandered off on the pretense of looking for grass that had not yet shed its dew. In reality, she simply wanted to be alone with her thoughts. A few months ago, she would have endorsed Fireweed’s plan without hesitation. The cirque summoned memories of Aster at every turn. But now, her pain tempered by motherhood to an extent, she relished her “contact” with the silver buckskin. When a sagebrush-freshened, juniper-seasoned wind rolled up from the lowlands, Talus envisioned the old mare gliding through chaparral with the hushed grace of a deer. When that same wind sent dead leaves scuttling along the ground, it was Aster’s breath that directed their movements. That nudged them toward their final resting places. No other range contained such a tender ghost.

Only one good thing—besides a reunion with Spurge—could come of the situation. If the mustangs left the pass far behind, Talus wouldn’t have to reproach herself for breaking her promise to guide the band there. The grulla peered up at the frost-lacquered summit. Viewed from a distance, it looked craggy, impenetrable, and, most of all, unreal. That, too, was a comfort. Abstraction made loss manageable. Easier to suppress. Easier to destroy.

The sparrow called again, its voice sweetly petulant. Talus paused, turned around, and regarded her companions horse by horse. Fireweed sampled the air with dilated nostrils. Thistle groomed Draba, apologizing for her churlishness in the proud, indirect manner of dominant mares. Hopsage led Starwort to a patch of clover and stepped back to watch him enjoy it. Unable to master her emotions, the young mustang faced away once more. She couldn’t bear to gaze at
any of her family members. Not with so much change looming. Not with a roundup about to
sever or at least test the bonds she and her bandmates had forged over the past year. She didn’t
know who would be captured, maybe even killed. She only knew her heart would never recover.
Thistle, who missed the range where she had spent many pleasant years with Bistort and watched Lupine grow into the finest colt on the mountain, agreed with Fireweed’s decision. The two leaders told their followers to be ready to leave the cirque in a week. Hopsage, Starwort, and especially Draba welcomed the news. Talus merely accepted it. She understood the red dun’s logic. The highest, loneliest section of Mount Mesteño was perfect for an inexperienced stallion, but not one expecting foals. Not one who hoped someday his family would rival Larkspur’s for speed, beauty, and power. She just hated goodbyes—even those addressed to the land rather than her fellow horses.

Yet she expressed her gratitude to the cirque and its surroundings anyway. When she drank from the tarn, she brushed its still, reflective surface with her muzzle as reverently as possible. When she visited the north meadow, she romped through the bunchgrass like a newborn dazzled by life, trying to memorize the color, give, and texture of that beloved turf. When a bighorn sheep bleated, she shrilled a reply, then looked on in unabashed delight as the animal reacted to her attempt at cross-species communication with shock. There was a wild, wondering quality to interactions of this sort that didn’t exist anywhere else. By the end of the week, the filly felt prepared to begin the next phase of her journey.

The mustangs climbed out of the cirque for the last time at dawn. They halted on the rim for a minute, gazing down on the desolate, fearsome, magnificent home Aster had selected for them the summer they became a family. Hopsage pointed out the river where Fireweed had won the mares’ allegiance, Starwort the field where paintbrush flamed in the spring, Draba the pit where the silver buckskin’s bones still lay, a decaying but appropriate tribute to the creature they
had once supported. Finally Thistle descended the incline, drawing the rest of the band with her. As Talus took her place behind the bays, a strong breeze coursed from the summit. It must have originated on the Other Side; she smelled aspens and junipers and, of course, the sugary bite of mahogany, in its invisible current.

“Aster,” the grulla whispered, “forgive me. I would not go back on my word if I were worthy of your teachings. Wait for me in the valley you dreamed of before we met. The Valley of the Lost Foals. We will run there together once I, too, am dead. And nothing will separate us again.”

The horses traveled east for most of the day. As they neared their destination, Talus recognized natural features she hadn’t seen since her youth. Shrubs diminished by the alpine wind swelled into the lush profusions she used to play amongst, tossing her stubbly mane and drumming the earth with her hard little hooves. Flowers that grew no taller than a rabbit’s ear when confined to the upper elevations reached comparatively dizzy heights. Even the grass changed, becoming longer and more languid. On occasion Talus snatched a mouthful; she had forgotten how verdant this part of Mount Mesteño remained deep into the fall.

“Do you still miss the cirque?” Draba asked, laughing at her sister’s hedonistic expression.

“Not while I’m eating such lovely grass,” the grulla said. She rolled her eyes and worked her ears to emphasize her pleasure as she chewed. “Try some.”

“I can’t. My stomach’s jumpy.”

“Why?”

“I’m nervous. What if we don’t run into our old family? I miss my mother.”
“I miss mine, too. But we have our own band now. Besides, Fireweed and Larkspur would never let their mares socialize.”

“I don’t need to socialize. I’d settle for a quick nuzzle. How about you?”

Talus’s withers rippled—an equine shrug. “I suppose. Oh, I don’t know! It’s all so confusing.”

The filly fell silent. She couldn’t understand her emotions, much less explain them to someone else. In spite of her love for Fireweed, respect for Aster, and affection for Draba, Talus considered Spurge the most important horse in her life. The one whose sleek, black, beautiful image roved the outskirts of her consciousness, informing all her decisions. All her joys and fears and aspirations. Yet the grulla had promised herself that she would be a great leader by the next time she saw her dam. How could she tell her first and most influential mentor of her failure without causing them both pain? And what would Woodrush—assuming she had survived the previous winter—think? The loam-colored filly had idolized her older sister, the very sister whose foolishness had sapped her energy even as she lay coiled in her mother’s womb…

“Fireweed,” Thistle cried from the front of the group, “I’ve found a stud pile. You’d better come check it out.”

The stallion trotted to the blue roan’s side and examined the mound of feces. Talus muscled aside Starwort to watch the ritual. When multiple males pass through the same territory, they defecate in order from weakest to strongest, leaving behind a record of their social hierarchy. Fireweed could learn a lot about his rivals in a single thorough sniff. After a moment, he turned to his mates, eyes bright and nostrils wide with information.

“Four bachelors were here. Bistort is their leader. No sign of Larkspur or any other mustang large enough to challenge me,” he announced.
Thistle’s ears twitched. Talus suspected the lead mare missed Bistort and hated that he had been forced to run with a gang of unruly colts. The grulla, too, regretted his downfall. She had never liked her smoky black brother, but his blood deserved to be imparted to future generations. Still, on the whole, the news was positive. If Larkspur hadn’t claimed the land west of his range once Bistort lost his family, Fireweed would be able to take possession of the area with minimal resistance.

The horses pressed on, spirits refreshed by their good fortune. Thistle accelerated to a canter. Hopsage and Starwort also lengthened their strides. Apparently the three sensed they had nearly reached their old territory. Fireweed, Talus, and Draba followed at a brisk clip, trusting their bandmates to locate their prospective home. As Talus hastened to keep up with the blue roan, she reflected on how much the character of Mount Mesteño had changed since her foalhood.

Aster, Lupine, Penstemon, and Bitterroot had all trod the earth shifting beneath the grulla’s feet at some point. Perhaps certain hidden corners of Mount Mesteño—swales protected from the wind or groves too dense to let in the rain—still bore their scents, hoofprints, and tail hairs. Like that deadly storm, they had sparked and singed and sizzled their way through life, leaving behind varying degrees of wreckage to prove their existence. Talus wondered what her own legacy would be, whether down from her winter coat would snag on branch after branch for ages, whether it would whisper her story to foals whose parents hadn’t even drawn breath yet.

“We’re here,” Thistle said, her voice high and cheerful. “We’ve entered Bistort’s range. Our range.”

The mustangs halted and inspected their environs. They stood at the edge of a large meadow similar to the one Talus had turned into an equine playground long ago. Bunchgrass
undulated in a dry autumn breeze, its movements as hypnotic as the braiding and unbraiding of
creek water. Young aspens huddled together in places, their whippy white trunks intensely bright
in the sun. From time to time a rabbit appeared, sitting up with its delicate forepaws pressed to its
breast or twisting its head to nibble an itch on its shoulder.

“It’s beautiful!” Draba said. “Are we going to stay here?”

Thistle replied, “Well, Aster and Bistort considered this meadow our home base. What
did we call it again, Hopsage?”

“Bergamot Meadow. I would know—I dropped Starwort under those aspens. He was so
little. So helpless and perfect,” the bay mare said, gazing at her son with love-lit eyes.

“I was never helpless,” Starwort grumbled. “Perfect, maybe, but never helpless.”

The horses laughed, then stared at Fireweed. As the more experienced leader, he had the
right to decide the band’s next move.

“We’ll rest now, and explore the area tomorrow,” the red dun said after a pause. “Don’t
get too relaxed, though. Bistort and the other bachelors could be nearby—their stool didn’t smell
that old.”

Talus and her companions dispersed. Thistle grazed in the middle of Bergamot Meadow,
Hopsage rolled in the softest grass she could find, and Starwort examined the site of his birth, his
ears cocked at a suspicious angle. Meanwhile Talus helped Draba remove a bur from her mane
while Fireweed observed the proceedings with amusement.

“Pull it out by the tip,” he called to the grulla. “If you put the whole thing in your mouth,
you’ll cut yourself.”

“Too late,” Talus said, spitting the bur onto the sod at her hooves and displaying her
thorny gums for comic effect.
“Your hair is back to its silky self, but your sister looks like she took a porcupine to the face. Are you satisfied?” Fireweed asked Draba good-naturedly.

“Yes,” she answered, feigning vanity. “I can’t go about with a snarl in my mane.”

The three mustangs snorted and tossed their forelocks to express their jollity. As Talus regarded her bandmates, happiness loosened her chest. For a merciful second, she forgot her mother, the dead, and even the coming roundup. Everything, it seemed, was normal. Innocuous. Carefree. But when her mirth faded, an emotion worse than sadness blossomed in her gut. She didn’t know what had caused it. Didn’t know what strange soil had fueled its growth. Only later, once night purpled Bergamot Meadow and her family members converged to share their body heat, could she name the sensation that had gripped her so suddenly and devastatingly. It was regret. Regret that she could not protect her fellow horses, could not carry them far from the dangers of Mount Mesteño on the tide of her love, could not bestow safety upon them with a wish. Somewhere in the darkness, an owl hooted, its low, sore-throated cry resonant yet remote. The filly closed her eyes and tried to sleep.
Talus woke to the tinkle of aspen leaves. She glanced at the saplings that had ushered Starwort into the world a little over a year earlier. Their foliage was beginning to yellow—in a few weeks, it would gleam as brightly as the sun-colored throatlatch of a male horned lark. The grulla shuddered. In her mind, the roundup would arrive the instant autumn drained Mount Mesteño of its green lifeblood. But there was no time to worry about the future—Thistle wanted to take her bandmates on a tour of their new home.

“Come on, everyone,” the blue roan said, pausing to nudge the still-snoring Hopsage with her muzzle, “we have to rise before the birds today.”

Draba stretched, her forelegs extended and her rump in the air. “Is that really necessary? My mother once told me, ‘Our bodies aren’t meant to stir until the bushtits chatter.’”

“Your mother probably needed her rest after you kept her up all night with your foal’s foibles. Don’t look so surprised; you’ll spout the same nonsense in the spring, when you have a miniature Draba at your side.”

After permitting her companions to graze and work the kinks out of their muscles, Thistle trotted from the meadow. The others followed in spite of their lethargy. Talus pricked her ears; the blue roan’s increased confidence in her leadership ability made the loss of Aster’s teachings less distressing. In a couple more months, the band would boast as capable a dominant mare as any on the mountain (except for Spurge). Did it matter that the silver buckskin had hoped to bequeath her family to a great mustang, not a very good one? Maybe, but most dreams went unrealized, most inheritances unclaimed.
The horses spent the rest of the day roaming their territory. Whenever Thistle showed her friends a particularly fine feeding or watering site, Fireweed marked the area with his scat. Even a perfunctory sniff would warn Bistort or Larkspur or the local bachelors to stay away. The red dun’s necessary yet tedious enterprise slowed down the group. The flightier individuals—Hopsage, Starwort, and Draba—grew impatient. Talus, however, appreciated the chance to examine her surroundings at length.

The land around Bergamot Meadow was almost as lovely as the grulla’s foalhood range. A spring flanked by dense willow thickets wound through the southern portion of the range. To the east lay a small basin where the mustangs could wallow in the summer or any time they needed to revitalize their coats with a mud bath. The north contained a series of aspen thickets and, above the treeline, a mineral lick rich in iron. Finally, in the west, a gorge offered protection from the wind. This rift in the earth rivaled the cirque for majesty. Its basalt sides descended mahogany-studded tier by mahogany-studded tier and its soft, teal belly absorbed hoofprints so readily it seemed no horse had set foot there for a century.

Talus’s spirits improved. She couldn’t help but revel in the beauty of the region even though she might be forced to part with that beauty within the month. But, late in the afternoon, after the mustangs returned to Bergamot Meadow, the encounter they had anticipated since their arrival occurred: Larkspur strode into Fireweed’s domain with his neck arched and his tail raised. In a pulse-quickening second, alarm replaced the grulla’s sense of well-being.

“Fireweed, he’s here!” she cried. “My father’s here!”

The stallion had already spied the intruder. “Thistle, gather the mares,” he said, his eyes glittering.
“Get behind Fireweed,” the blue roan ordered. “Right away, Starwort! That big dun could cripple a tiny thing like you with one blow.”

The horses obeyed, rushing to Thistle and arranging themselves in a tight circle. Larkspur would have to scatter them before he could steal a female. Wedged between Hopsage and Draba, Talus strained to see the action. She reared onto her hind legs and caught sight of a dark shape at the edge of the meadow. It was Spurge. Milfoil and Currant stood next to her. Three yearlings peered over their dams’ withers, their ears erect and their nostrils dilated.

Talus dropped to all fours with a thud and said, “Draba, our mothers have come! And I think Woodrush, Gentian, and Yarrow are with them!”

“You’re right,” the dunalino gasped. “Oh, how I long to speak to Milfoil. To smell her and touch her…”

“Stay where you are, you two. The fight’s about to start,” Thistle said, stamping a hoof for emphasis.

Talus glanced at her former bandmates once more and turned her attention to the stallions. Larkspur had halted in the center of the meadow, his head bowed and his silky black forelock in his eyes. His muscles still pushed his skin to the limit. His battle-scarred hide still radiated speed even at rest. Only his muzzle betrayed his age—gray hair frosted the bridge of his nose. The pale fur reminded Talus of the resourceful alpine plants that wriggled through stone to claim a place in the world. Just as those plants eventually spread across the rocks that had impeded their growth, the senior horse chipping away at Larkspur’s youth would one day reign supreme. The prospect saddened the grulla though her allegiance had switched to Fireweed. Draba must have felt the same; she, too, emitted a rainy musk as she studied her father.
Snorting and pawing the ground, the red dun joined his rival in the middle of Bergamot Meadow. He looked every bit as impressive as his elder. The afternoon light dazzled his coat, his toned body quivered with repressed fury, and his flint-colored hooves barely disturbed the grass as he advanced, a sign of agility. Talus recalled the first time the two stallions fought. Larkspur’s bulk and experience had made short work of four-year-old Fireweed. That would not be the case now. If the combatants couldn’t settle their differences with an exchange of breath or other ritualistic behaviors, a protracted struggle loomed.

Fireweed drew himself up a mere stride from Larkspur and said, “What brings you here? This land belongs to me and my family. If you try to drive us off, you’ll regret it. I’m not a skinny bachelor anymore.”

“No, you’re certainly not,” Larkspur said, his voice as calm and confident as Talus remembered. “But I’ve been a band stallion since you were a suckling. Don’t underestimate veterans—we pick up a lot of tricks over the years.”

“Tricks won’t save you from a thrashing. And you haven’t answered my question. Why have you come?”

“I saw Bistort and his friends trotting south in search of a new home base, so I knew a stronger male must have arrived. I didn’t mind being neighbors with a ragtag gang of bachelors. They never dared cross me. You’re different.”

“So take me on already. You’re not getting any younger.”

Larkspur stepped forward, extended his neck, and blew into Fireweed’s nostrils. The red dun’s eyes brightened with fear. For a queasy moment, Talus thought her mate would retreat. She wouldn’t have blamed him. Her sire didn’t just smell of sagebrush. His distinctive odor also contained the terror of vanquished challengers, the assurance of a seasoned fighter, and the
devotion of a stallion willing to die for his mares. But Fireweed summoned the courage that had carried him out of the pen during the previous roundup, into the river after Starwort, and far from the relative security of the cirque. He held his position, inhaled, and blasted his earthy scent into Larkspur’s face.

Larkspur closed his eyes as Fireweed’s breath rippled the silver hair on his muzzle. Talus studied her father. Surely he had not battled a stallion as powerful as the red dun since Bistort’s sire Finch roamed the mountain. But he didn’t flinch or even tremble. Instead, he leaned forward as if eager for action. For the spinning, screaming, blood-letting intimacy of combat.

Both horses retreated. Their olfactory negotiations had failed. When they came together again, their teeth would be bared and their hooves raised. The spectators tensed, anticipating the fleshy thunk of bodies colliding. Talus looked across the meadow at her mother. The mare’s expression was unreadable. Her eyes had vanished into her black fur, a trick of the early evening light. Did she care that Fireweed’s defeat would render her daughter homeless? That Larkspur’s might reunite them?

Fireweed made the first move. He charged Larkspur without warning—the same attack that had felled the bachelor in the clay barrens. This time it didn’t work. Larkspur leaped out of the way, spun around, and bit his assailant’s hindquarters. Fireweed squealed more from rage than pain. Talus willed him to remain calm. His temper would hurt his chances in a skirmish with an older, wiliest stallion.

“Did you mistake me for one of Bistort’s young friends?” Larkspur asked mockingly.

“You won’t catch a mustang of my experience flatfooted.”

Fireweed snapped, “Gloat while you can. You’ll be well-acquainted with my hooves soon enough.”
The red dun gathered himself for another rush. Larkspur noticed the subtle change in his rival’s stance, feinted to the left, landed a blow, and described a nimble circle in the grass. Talus glanced at Draba in confusion. The fillies’ sire usually favored strength over finesse. He wouldn’t switch tactics unless he had discovered a weakness in his opponent.

“Who taught you to fight? My yearling son Yarrow is a better strategist than you,” Larkspur said.

“Coward!” Fireweed cried, lunging at his elder ineffectually. “Stay still so we can have a real contest.”

Talus’s ears pricked. She understood her father’s angle. The big dun had also sensed Fireweed’s fury and planned to exploit it.

“He’s baiting you! Keep a cool head and you’ll be all right,” the grulla called.

“Hush,” Thistle and Hopsage said in unison. Mares were supposed to maintain their composure during clashes between stallions. After all, most females pass from one mate to the next every few years, making it counterproductive to get attached to a single stud.

Larkspur glanced at Talus, his features softening for an instant. “I see my grulla daughter is still a willful creature,” he said, the timbre of his voice suggesting tender amusement rather than disapproval.

“She is,” Fireweed agreed, “but I’ll fight you until I drop to give her a good home. To give all of my mares a good home.”

Talus examined her mate. The light in his eyes had dimmed from a glitter to a glow. Apparently her words had made an impact. A calmer, craftier Fireweed faced Larkspur now. The battle-scarred dun sensed the change, too. He pinned his ears, squared his shoulders, and waited for his opponent to launch a second attack.
Nothing happened. Fireweed stood motionless. Only his mane moved, blowing from one side of his neck to the other as a damp evening wind hurtled across Bergamot Meadow. His strategy was clear. He wanted Larkspur to take the offensive. Talus snorted appreciatively. So did her bandmates. Their champion had learned a valuable lesson. Win or lose, he would emerge from this struggle a better stallion.

Larkspur flared his nostrils in annoyance, but adjusted to his new role as aggressor within seconds. His great body tensed muscle by muscle. Talus recalled the mountain lion that had nearly killed her in the juniper belt at the beginning of her adult life. It, too, had wound itself up before unleashing a terrifying burst of speed, its claws popping from their fuzzy sheaths, its scapulas rising, and its rear legs quivering with restrained energy. The grulla shivered though the sun would not dip below the western face of Mount Mesteño for several hours. Protect my partner. Protect the father of my foal, she thought, addressing some nameless force in her desperation.

Both males leaned forward as if yearning for contact. Then Larkspur rushed Fireweed at a pace so swift his black forelock whipped backward. Mustang met mustang in a scrimmage of teeth, hooves, and hair. Talus’s eyes flickered. She could barely track the action. Her sire battered her mate with his steely forefeet. Her mate tore open her sire’s withers with his heavy incisors. Neither horse could gain an advantage. Whenever one landed a blow, the other followed suit. Finally, exhausted, they drew apart to catch their breath.

“Is it over? Who won?” Draba whispered to Talus. Sweat had darkened the little dunalino’s coat. She might have waged a war of her own.

“I don’t think so,” the young mustang said. “They’re tired but not all in.”
Larkspur and Fireweed gasped for air, their barrels heaving. Blood flowed from the dun’s withers in fantastic patterns. He looked like a pinto whose white patches had been replaced with gore.

Fireweed was no better off. Though not bleeding as much as Larkspur, he had weathered more blows. His coat, once softer than a freshly unfurled petal, looked coarse. Raked. Pitted. Furrowed. Talus’s ears drooped. The filly could tell her mate would never be quite as beautiful as before. His hoof-struck flesh would solidify into hairless weals, giving him a lumpy appearance. But only cowardly stallions remained handsome until the end of their lives. No sensible mare would prefer an unmarked male to a marked one.

“Have you had enough?” Larkspur asked Fireweed. Talus heard a note of hope in her sire’s voice. The impossible had happened. A horse had battled the big dun to a draw. Had sated his appetite for combat.

“No,” Fireweed said. “I’ll take as much punishment as necessary to claim this land for my family. Make your next move, old warrior.” The grulla studied the father of her unborn foal with admiration. She was proud to carry his offspring. Someday she would describe this fight to her son or daughter. The little mustang’s pulse would accelerate as it learned of the courage of its sire—and grandsire.

“Then prepare yourself, Fireweed,” Larkspur said. “I’ll hurt you badly if I must. Just remember I offered you the chance to back down.”

The king reared onto his hind legs. The heir apparent rose to meet him. They caught each other in a ferocious embrace, their forelimbs intertwining as they both struggled to deliver a brawl-ending bite. The longer they scrapped, the slower they moved. Exhaustion rolled through their bodies in hide-pulsing waves. Lather spangled their necks and loins. The mares leaned
forward in anticipation. Either Larkspur or Fireweed would succumb to fatigue soon. Horses couldn’t suffer as these two had suffered without reaching a breaking point. Without entering a place of agony only the bravest could access and only the great could survive.

Larkspur tried to push Fireweed backward. Fireweed tried to push Larkspur backward. The muscles in their hindquarters hardened and their rear feet tore rifts in the sod as they strained. Suddenly, in an odd, protracted motion reminiscent of the fall of a tree, the mustangs toppled to the right still locked together. They landed with a muffled yet horrifying thump that pricked every pair of ears in the meadow. Talus closed her eyes, unable to watch her father or her mate leap upright only to buckle from the pain of a fractured leg or dislocated shoulder. In the silence that followed, a mourning dove took flight, its high-pitched wing whistle the aural embodiment of the grulla’s fear.

A moment later, Thistle cried, “I don’t believe it! They’re getting to their feet!”

Talus opened her eyes, a wild joy in her heart. It was true. Larkspur and Fireweed stood face to face in the center of Bergamot Meadow, worn-out but whole. They stared at one another yet made no attempt to resume their battle. The mares exchanged glances. A single thought united their minds: Is it over? If so, whose range is this?

Larkspur and Fireweed breathed into each other’s nostrils. Their ears flickered, an indication of confusion. Apparently neither smelled more exhausted than his rival. There could be no victor without continued bloodshed. Yet both horses appeared too weak to keep fighting. They remained still for a moment. Only the muscles beneath their coats twitched. At last they backpedaled at the same time.
“I don’t concede defeat,” Larkspur said, “but I’ll recognize this land as your territory. As long as we’re evenly matched, we must stick to our ranges to avoid conflict and behave ourselves whenever our bands share resources. Do you agree to these terms?”

Fireweed’s eyes gleamed with relief. He said, “Yes. I’ll respect your boundaries if you respect mine. But I can’t promise not to challenge you for your home or your mares once your strength deserts you.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to—age catches up with the best of us. I accepted the fact that I would die mate-less years ago. It’s the price all stallions pay for the privilege of having a family. Now, if you don’t mind, my band and I will rest here for a little while.”

Fireweed assented. Then, limping slightly, he returned to his companions. Thistle and Hopsage converged on him to lick his wounds. Meanwhile Starwort praised his surrogate father so effusively he made a nuisance of himself; Draba had to herd the colt to the outskirts of the group. Talus alone didn’t react to the turn of events. She simply stared at the red dun with a mixture of empathy and awe.

“What’s the matter, grulla?” Fireweed asked, his voice as weak as his body. “Bistort’s territory belongs to us. Our future is secure.”

Talus wanted to tell him how much his suffering on behalf of the band moved her, but she couldn’t find a word big enough to capture the heartbreaking grandeur of the confrontation. Instead, she assured him, “Nothing’s the matter. You were wonderful.”

“He was more than wonderful,” Thistle said, her nose soiled by blood from the cut on Fireweed’s hindquarters. “He was incredible! I doubt Mount Mesteño has ever seen a clash like that before.”

Hopsage added, “I doubt it will ever see a clash like that again.”
Starwort wheeled, bucked, and reared as if embroiled in battle. “It might when I reach full weight,” he cried joyfully.

“It will when I do.”

Talus and her bandmates looked up at the interruption. A handsome bay roan yearling stood a horse length away. Mischief cocked his ears and tensed his muzzle. It was Currant’s son Yarrow. He had seized the opportunity to approach Starwort when the mares in his family busied themselves with Larkspur’s injuries.

“Little brother!” Draba exclaimed in delight. She trotted toward Yarrow, then halted.

“Fireweed, can we mingle?”

The red dun glanced at his opponent. Larkspur, tended to by Spurge, Milfoil, and Currant with the exaggerated affection lavished upon weary stallions, showed no signs of aggression.

“Suit yourself,” Fireweed said. “Your sire seems too tired to cause any more trouble. I know I am.”

The dunalino rushed Yarrow and washed his face with her tongue. He escaped only to be cornered by Talus. She sniffed him from withers to rump, glorying in the brushy scent of her father and the pollen-like odor of Currant.

“Sisters, stop!” Yarrow cried, tossing his head as if to shake off the equine kisses his half-siblings had given him. “I want to play with that bay colt.”

Currant trotted over at the sound of her son’s voice. “Don’t bother Fireweed and his band, dear one,” she said. Her dark, gentle eyes, so much like Penstemon’s even though the two mares weren’t related, settled on the red dun nervously. Talus respected her former companion’s wariness. Stallions sometimes attack colts who don’t carry their blood. For a moment, the grulla hoped the foal inside her was a filly. A filly who would never have to fight to reproduce. The
moment passed. A healthy youngster with strong lungs and clean-boned legs would be enough. More than enough.

“'I'm not bothering them,’” Yarrow insisted, adding, in a whisper, “'and don’t call me ‘dear one’ in front of strangers.’”

Fireweed lifted his muzzle. “Let the yearlings tussle. I'll keep my distance.”

Yarrow squealed and galloped off across the meadow. Starwort followed. Talus watched them romp through the bunchgrass, their coats shining in the wan light, their hard, immature bodies buzzing with an energy unique to their age. Her heart trembled in her chest. She missed her own youth and anticipated her foal’s in equal measures.

“Yarrow has grown into a fine mustang,” Draba said to Currant. “He looks like you, too.”

The strawberry roan flirted her mane in an unsuccessful attempt to mask her pride in her colt. “He does have my white ticking. His athleticism comes from his sire, though. But how have you been, Draba? Your smell is different. Sweeter. Are you pregnant?”

“Yes. Talus is, too. We’re due in the spring.”

Currant stared at the grulla for an instant, then pricked her ears to show good will. If she blamed Spurge’s thundercloud daughter for Penstemon’s death, she hid it well. “My,” she said, “you must work up all the stallions you meet. I’ve never seen a two-year-old with such sleek flanks and powerful hindquarters before. You’ll be as beautiful as your dam in a few seasons.”

Talus thanked Currant for her kind words. A second later, a delicious scent filled the young horse’s nostrils. The scent of skin and sweat and partially digested vegetation. The scent of grass aglow with dew in the blue hour that precedes dawn. The scent of a life-producing life. Of a mother.

“As beautiful as I am? I don’t think so. Granted, she’s an attractive creature.”
Talus spun around. Spurge stood in front of her. The black mare switched her tail, not with irritation, but amusement. Unlike Larkspur, she hadn’t grayed. Yet her belly appeared slightly pendulous, her back slightly concave. It occurred to the grulla that her dam had turned ten several months earlier.

The realization startled Talus more than it saddened her. It was easy to picture Larkspur or Fireweed or Draba lying dead in some lonely pocket of Mount Mesteño, their bodies oddly shrunken without the energy that had animated them in life. Painful, but easy. Yet the grulla couldn’t even conceive of a world in which Spurge no longer chased the wind through the high places. Whenever she entertained such a terrifying possibility, her unconscious mind insisted that existence itself had begun and would end with the black mare.

“Talus, aren’t you glad to see me?” the older horse asked, puzzled by her tepid reception.

The young mustang’s misgivings thawed and evaporated in the warmth of her mother’s love. She leaped forward. Spurge did the same. They met in a snarl of storm and midnight limbs, winding their necks around each other’s withers, rubbing their flanks together to generate a pleasant friction, and inhaling the grassy fragrance that marked them as relatives with desperate, joyful, white-eyed hunger. Talus was home.

“I missed you so!” the filly cried.

“As I missed you,” Spurge said. “As we all missed you.”

The black mare stepped aside. A dunalino, an apricot dun, and a dark bay stood behind her. Talus recognized Milfoil in an instant. Draba’s dam gleamed in the evening sunlight, her coat as pale and bright as a freshly spun cocoon.

“Friend of my mother, mother of my friend,” the grulla said with the formal but abiding affection horses reserve for their “aunts.”
Milfoil looked past her unofficial niece and propped. She had spotted Draba. A moment later, the dunalinos collided in their own enthusiastic, full-body greeting. Talus watched the two wheel, nicker, and exchange breath until their happiness made her heart sting. By the time she turned back to her mother, the apricot dun and the dark bay were ogling her.

“Gentian, Woodrush, can it really be you?” she said. Both fillies had matured into stunning yearlings. Their upright manes had fallen, their barrels had rounded, and their hindquarters had gained definition. Even their feet had changed, the hoof walls hardening with age.

“It can,” Gentian said with the boldness of a horse confident in her speed and strength. One day the sturdy daughter of Milfoil might run at the head of a band. “Though I don’t blame you for asking. I’m not a little thing anymore—Larkspur says I’ll be as tough as you in a few springs.”

Talus ignored her half-sister’s competitive tone. Gentian was powerful for an adolescent mustang, but she would never surpass the grulla. Not without Spurge’s genes. Besides, physical courage has no value unless tempered by a good dose of humility.

Gentian joined Milfoil and Draba. Talus wasn’t offended. She had always preferred Woodrush to the other foals; they probably resented her for it. But the loam-colored filly shared Spurge’s blood—and, in the form of her undersized body, her sibling’s mistake. How could Talus not feel something extra in the diminutive mustang’s presence?

“You’re even bigger than before,” Woodrush said in awe. “You’re almost as big as Mother!”

“You will be, too,” the grulla assured her sister.
“No, I won’t. I’ve accepted that. I’m just happy to have survived this long. If I can last one more year, I’ll be hardy enough to live a decent life, even breed.”

Talus gazed at Woodrush with sorrow and admiration. The youngster had expressed herself so wisely that she stirred memories of Aster. It seemed her tenuous position on Mount Mesteño had gifted her with a premature understanding of tragedy. Talus pressed her nose into Woodrush’s neck, inhaling the clean, snow-like odor the smaller horse had borne since her birth.

When the grulla and the dark bay separated, they noticed their dam looked sad. Her ears were limp, her eyes dull, her muzzle slack. Talus suspected the black mare couldn’t stomach the contrast between her daughters. Each possessed what the other needed to reach her potential. The two-year-old lacked the yearling’s insight, the yearling the two-year-old’s athleticism. Together, they made a complete mustang.

“Why don’t you say hello to Draba? She’d love to speak to you,” Talus said to Woodrush. The dark bay agreed with a snort that suggested she could also interpret Spurge’s moods and resented her sibling’s attempt to exclude her from an “adult” conversation. Still, she didn’t appear too disappointed; Draba was popular with all the foals.

“Woodrush is very smart for her age,” Spurge said. “Maybe smarter than any of us. You don’t have to coddle her like Gentian and Yarrow.”

“I see that now. Is she usually blunt about her chances of survival?” Talus asked.

“Yes. I can tell it bothers you. No mustang ever suffered from realistic expectations, though. She hasn’t even gone into heat yet. Neither has Gentian. The roundup must have delayed their development. That’s why they didn’t leave home this summer.”

“I wish Woodrush were as strong as I am.”
“Few horses are as strong as you are. Woodrush is less below average than you are above average, you know. But let’s move on to a more cheerful topic. How did you and Draba end up with Fireweed?"

Talus hesitated. The moment she had dreaded, the moment in which she would have to admit she had failed in her quest to become a lead mare, had arrived. At least, in relaying the events of the past year, she could build up to that final disappointment. Could prepare her mother for a letdown. The young mustang released her breath in a long gust of air to steady herself and began.

The words came to Talus more easily than she expected. She told Spurge of her encounter with Bistort, of her flight from the mountain lion, of her acceptance into Fireweed’s band, of the journey to the cirque, of the cirque itself…As she spoke, she relived each memory in both great detail and great abstraction. Aster retained—even acquired—definition, every gray hair on her muzzle its own entity. Its own delicate, silver world. Other horses, like the doomed palomino filly, dwindled to a shape or a scent or a color. To a symbol of the terrible beauty of life.

The grulla flared her nostrils, monitoring her dam’s emotional response to the tale. Spurge’s coat radiated the sweet musk of awe at the magnificence of the alpine zone, the tart odor of disbelief at Double Sight’s goodness, and the damp smell of regret at the corpse in the aspens, the corpse that probably belonged to Vetch. But the black mare seemed most affected by her daughter’s training. When Talus described Aster’s lessons, Spurge reeked of excitement, vindication, and jealousy, a complex bouquet that called to mind crushed dock leaves.
“I always knew you were special,” she said. “Yet I never imagined...to be chosen by Aster...chosen over the finest horses on Mount Mesteño...What an honor! Larkspur, you have to hear this—”

Talus hushed her mother before the dun stallion could be convinced to trade rest for gossip. “Stop! I’m not Aster’s heir.”

“You received her teachings.”

“I don’t intend to use them.”

“What are you talking about? Most mares would give their tails for the chance. I’d give mine.”

The grulla answered by continuing her story. She transported her mother to the cirque on the night of the storm. Rain turned the soil into a perilous soup. Saplings bowed in the wind, their whippy bodies tested for the first time. Lightning clawed so many holes in the sky it seemed some wicked beast from another universe was trying to shred a path to Mount Mesteño. The animals, too, suffered. Rodents abandoned flooded burrows only to be swept downhill by avalanches of dirty water. Songbirds rocked in the air, their tiny wings and hollow bones unable to cope with the gale. Talus herself surrendered to a primal terror, whinnying, wheeling, and rearing whenever thunder boomed overhead.

The stage set, the filly moved on to the key events of the evening. She spoke as calmly as she could under the circumstances, but her hide released the wet perfume of sorrow in such quantities that every horse in Bergamot Meadow glanced at her. Resurrected by her apprentice’s voice, Aster forced her frightened bandmates onto the rim of the cirque. Forced them to jump from the ledge to the ground. Forced them to leave her behind in the pit. The image silenced
Talus. She couldn’t form one more word. She didn’t need to. Spurge would understand. Spurge had to understand.

“Daughter,” the black mare said at length, “the death of any mustang hurts. The death of a mustang like Aster…it wears out my heart just to picture that grand old buckskin lying still in the mud. I won’t pretend to imagine the pain you felt. The pain you feel. Yet I can’t grasp why this tragedy affects your future as a leader.”

Talus cranked up her head in surprise. How could Spurge not see that her grulla offspring had been exposed as an irresponsible fool once again? Had she been listening at all? “I caused her death! I killed her as much as I killed Penstemon.”

“Nature killed her. Blame the rain and the wind and the lightning if you want a scapegoat.”

“I knew something bad was going to happen.”

“And Aster didn’t? Aster, who taught you the ways of the mountain? She must have sensed danger as well.”

“Then why didn’t she stop?”

“She couldn’t. Not with her entire family depending on her to find a safe route to the thicket. Don’t you get it? Aster wasn’t thinking of herself. She was thinking of you.”

Talus tossed her forelock and scored the grass with her right front hoof. The silver buckskin had thought of herself. Had thought of deserting her fear-immobilized bandmates to save her own life. A life that would have ended in a year. Her selfishness—her ability to rise above it—was what made her sacrifice remarkable. What prevented her student’s wounds from healing. “I don’t care! I’m not fit to lead. Accept it already. I have.”
Spurge studied Talus. During the pause that followed, the grulla stared past her dam at a stand of aspens. The trees shivered as if aware of her gaze. She wished they really were sentient, that she could ask them why their species had brought her such bad luck, had prevailed over both her dash into the creek-split meadow and Aster’s demise.

“I don’t believe you,” Spurge said suddenly. “I don’t believe you’ve accepted your role as an average band member. The light in your eyes has dimmed, but it hasn’t gone out.”

“So what? It’ll go out eventually.”

“Maybe. And maybe not.”

Talus turned away. She would give in to rage if she looked at her mother. The black mare had caused the entire mess by convincing a filly too willful to be placed in a position of power to strive for greatness. How dare she gaze into that same filly’s eyes and interpret what she saw there? “Spurge,” the grulla said, fighting to maintain an even tone, “why do you want me to become a leader? Do you care about me or your legacy?”

“You, of course. What a question!” the older horse cried.

Talus glanced over her withers at her dam. Spurge had pinned her ears in indignation, but her coat exuded the spice of guilt. “Tell me the truth. I deserve that much.”

“Fine. I do care about my legacy. I do want my blood to survive me—and only accomplished sons and daughters will let me die satisfied. You’ll understand when you drop your foal in the spring.”

“I’m sick of ‘You’ll understand when.’ For once, I wish you’d consider what I understand now: that you never loved me. Just my potential.”

“Talus, I wasn’t finished yet! My desire for you to live a life worthy of your talents has no bearing on my love for you. I would love you if you were sickly or crippled or barren. Do you
think I don’t adore Woodrush because she might not pass on my lineage to the next generation? Well, do you?”

The grulla stared across Bergamot Meadow at her little sister. In the anemic but luminous sunlight, the yearling glowed the rich brown of a cowbird’s head. She was as beautiful as any of the larger, stronger young ones. More importantly, she had a kind heart. “No,” Talus admitted, her anger dissipating in spite of her sense of betrayal. “I know you’d do anything to protect her.”

“As I would for you. As I did for you when we ran together,” Spurge said.

She was right. Images ghosted through the filly’s mind. Images of a dark mustang sacrificing herself for her family without the slightest hesitation. Talus watched her mother outmaneuver Greasewood in the basin, clear away snow until her fetlocks bled so her companions could eat, and hold her ground while humans advanced during the culling. Nobody could doubt her regard for her band—her regard for her progeny—in good faith.

Talus lowered her head half in deference, half in shame. “I’m sorry, Mother. I know you love me. I know you’ve always loved me,” she said.

Spurge’s long-lashed eyes glittered in a beam of washy light. The sun, like a swollen river, had spilled amber floodwater across the sky. “I’m sorry, too,” the black mare said. “I shouldn’t have indulged you so much when you were small. I shouldn’t have assumed that teaching you the values of a leader would transfer them to you.”

The grulla remembered her dam’s words on the evening after the roundup. “Are you still disappointed in me?”

“No. Even then, I was more disappointed in myself than you.”

Mother and daughter stood side by side for a long time. As the temperature dropped, owls, bats, and coyotes stirred. Talus envied their boldness. Their ability to navigate the dim
hours between nightfall and daybreak. But perhaps they feared warm, bright things instead of shadows. The young horse imagined them turning their faces away from the entrances to their homes as color rushed back into the world, their small, soft bodies aquiver. It was a ridiculous thought. Talus snorted in amusement. To her shock, the sound that escaped her vibrated with anger.

“What’s wrong?” Spurge asked.

The grulla couldn’t say. Her fury had no object. No focal point. It simply lapped against the banks of her heart. “I don’t know!” she cried. “I just wish life were easy. I just wish I could tell which path to follow.”

Before Spurge had a chance to reply, Larkspur limped over. He said wearily, “Let’s move out. It will be dark soon and I don’t want to draw any predators in poor lighting. Mountain lions are trouble enough when you can see them coming.”

Talus’s rage faded with the sorrow of parting. The filly had hoped her parents and their bandmates would stay in the meadow until dawn. She couldn’t blame Larkspur, though—the wounded stallion would feel less vulnerable in his own territory. There, he could wallow in the creek Talus played beside in her youth, rinsing the blood off his tattered coat and speaking to his foals in his calm, gentle fashion. The grulla longed to return to that creek as well. To see it glisten in the moonglow. Yet as she looked from her round-bellied dam to her gray-muzzled sire, she sensed how much the last year had altered her relationship with them. She didn’t need their affection anymore, at least not in the way she needed Fireweed’s desire or Draba’s friendship.

“All right,” Spurge said. “I’ll set a course for home once you’ve gathered the others.”

Larkspur forced himself into a trot and drove his mates together. The little ones presented a greater challenge. Yarrow evaded his father in an attempt to remain with Starwort. Meanwhile
Gentian and Woodrush studied Fireweed from a safe distance. They probably hadn’t encountered an adult male who didn’t share their blood before.

Talus faced Spurge. There was still so much to be said. About the foal due in the spring. About Bitterroot and his tragic amnesia. About the roundup that could occur at any moment. The roundup! Did the black mare know of the coming terror?

The grulla prodded her mother with an urgent, earnest nose. “I have bad news. The humans plan to capture many horses this fall. They want all the grass for their cattle.”

Spurge cocked her ears and widened her eyes—the body language of alarm—yet seemed more melancholy than startled. “Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes. A tame one told me. A reliable tame one.”

“Normally I wouldn’t trust a creature who associates with two-leggeds, but I’ve suspected danger would arrive sooner or later for some time now. Not long after you and Draba left, humans drove dozens of cows to Willow Creek, then to the valley, then to the juniper belt.”

“They’re in your range? They’re in your range as we speak?” The prospect revived Talus’s anger. To picture the vegetation that had nourished every son and daughter of Larkspur rent by pleated hooves…

“No. They only stay through the summer. Cattle aren’t as good at foraging in the cold as we are. They’ll be back, though.”

“What will you do to protect your band?”

“Take cover and hope the silver birds don’t find us. What else can a mustang do?”

Talus thought of the mountain pass and the mahogany thicket. They were too far away to be of use, yet she envisioned them whenever she worried about the roundup. They might have
been ticks burrowed into the skin of her mind, dormant until roused by a sight or sound or smell that made her reflect on loss, on the fundamental sorrow of life.

“Talus,” Spurge said, “Talus, I have to go.”

The grulla looked for her sire. He had at last gathered the foals and restored them to their dams. Yarrow appeared resentful, his sisters downcast. It was strange that any horse could care about play cut short while disaster neared. Talus wondered whether her siblings were selfish, ignorant, or resilient. She guessed resilient. The young possess a special courage the old can’t remember except in their sleep, a courage born of having less responsibility and therefore less to lose.

“Daughter, this is it. This is goodbye. We may not see each other again for a long time,” Spurge said, trying to engage her offspring once more.

Talus turned away from the yearlings and gazed at her mother. The knowledge that one or both of them could be culled charged the air like lightning ready to strike. “But we will see each other again. That’s the important thing,” the filly said.

“I hope you’re right.”

“I am. Aster often dreamed of a valley where her dead and stolen foals lived. Where they waited for her. I believe she’s there now. I believe we’ll all be there someday.”

“Do you? Well, it’s a nice thought.”

Talus pinned her ears. Her mother was supposed to agree with—or at least accept—the concept of Aster’s Valley, not dismiss it as a “nice thought.” Now they couldn’t comfort themselves with the fantasy of an ultimate reunion. Yet the grulla shouldn’t have expected to be humored at two years old. Nor did she need to be. Not even Aster took the Valley for granted. As far as Talus knew, no horse had ever unraveled the mystery of death. Perhaps humans alone
possessed the secret. Perhaps it allowed them to kill their fellow animals without good reason. Certainly it would be easier to stop the breath of another organism if you were sure something better, fuller, and richer came next.

“I’m sorry,” Spurge said, sensing her daughter’s displeasure. “I just don’t have the patience for hope anymore. Only the young and the old do. Listen, about Aster—”

Talus switched her tail and cried, “I’ve made my decision. I refuse to follow in her hoofsteps. And what’s wrong with that? Being a lead mare isn’t for everyone. I’ll still play my part in the band. I’ll be a mate, a mother, a sister…”

“Hold on! I wasn’t going to talk about your training. But since you brought it up, I will say this: Your destiny is your own. Nobody else can choose it for you. After today, I’ll never try to influence you again. Promise me that you will choose, though. Don’t live in a place of indecision. Don’t wait for an answer to your problems. There is no answer, except for the one in your heart.”

“I’m not indecisive, no matter what you see in my eyes. No matter what you think you see in my eyes.”

“Fine. I can’t argue with you in any case—Larkspur’s eager to be off and I don’t want to upset him when he’s wounded.”

“Wait! Why did you mention Aster a second ago?”

Spurge gazed at Talus with a dreadful curiosity on her beautiful black face. “I had a question for you. Did Aster encounter all her foals in her dreams? Even the colt born ‘unequipped for life’?” she asked.

The grulla remembered the day she eavesdropped on her dam and future mentor. The day she realized the terror of a roundup could affect mustangs who hadn’t even entered the world.
Could stunt or maim or doom them before they understood anything about existence. Anything about themselves. “I don’t know,” Talus said, startled. “Aster didn’t go into detail.”

Spurge shrugged, nuzzled her daughter, and trotted off to lead her family home. The amber floodwater had receded. In its absence, a pink light the color of the sensitive flesh inside a rabbit’s ear spread across the sky. The light gave the departing horses a rosy tint. They seemed to carry a mantle of spring blossoms on their withers. The sight would stay with the young mustang. Its loveliness, however, was not the source of its power.

The image moved—and disturbed—Talus because it captured the spirit of the day now releasing its final radiant breath. Within the past twenty-four hours, the young mustang had explored a new section of the mountain, witnessed a gargantuan struggle between the two most important stallions in her life, and reunited with her natal band only to part ways once again. Somehow the juxtaposition of the westering sun’s soft coral shadow and the dark, rugged silhouettes of the horses spoke to the grulla’s emotional tumult. Yet when the last member of the equine phalanx (Larkspur, his tired head held high) vanished into a stand of aspens, Talus felt no closure or catharsis.

She told herself she simply needed more time to process her conversation with Spurge. After all, the black mare had been more forthright than ever before. Had revealed the limits of her love, her optimism, and even her tact without shame. Talus trembled, horror worming through her gut, as she realized she didn’t know her mother as well as her mother knew her. The revelation shouldn’t have surprised the grulla. She had long sensed that, while Spurge gave her life meaning, she herself accounted for a fraction of her dam’s thoughts. A sizable fraction, but a fraction nonetheless. This was the nature of parent-offspring relationships. Yet Talus remained rattled, rattled by the strange anger she had experienced in the older mustang’s presence, rattled
by the bizarre question about Aster’s deformed colt, rattled by her continued love for the flawed creature who had pushed her into the world so many months earlier. Rattled by the fact that she was rattled.

But, later in the evening, half-asleep with Draba to her left and Hopsage to her right, the grulla accepted the truest cause of her unrest: not Spurge, but the possibility she had raised. The possibility Talus still yearned to be a leader worthy of the silver buckskin’s teachings. Anything would be better than that. Anything. Except maybe the death of the tiny horse coiled in its pre-birth slumber within the filly.

Talus lifted her gaze to the stars above Bergamot Meadow. They gleamed with the white malice of frost on furled leaf buds, of snow turned to ice, of tarns glassed by subzero temperatures. The young mustang cast her eyes to the ground as soon as she registered the terror in the sky. Even then, she couldn’t escape her fear. The stars were not the only things shining while Mount Mesteño darkened and quieted. A light flickered in Talus, too. It was the light of her dream, rekindled by her mother’s words: “Promise me that you will choose.” And, unlike the chill glitter of the heavens, it was warm. That worried her most of all. The hotter a fire burns, the harder it is to snuff out.
CHAPTER 51

The first windstorm of the season arrived a week later. As soon as a vanguard breeze—a whispered warning from the high places—silvered the grass in Bergamot Meadow, Thistle led the band to the gorge. There, protected by the ancient basalt formations on either side of the slash in the earth, the mustangs waited for the cold snap to pass. It didn’t. It intensified. Even many horse lengths below the “surface” of Mount Mesteño, Talus and her companions could hear trees groaning as they struggled to keep their roots in the ground. Periodically one of those trees lost its fight for life, announced its defeat in a splinterly voice, and fell prostrate upon the soil from which it had emerged, green and tremulous, many years ago. Then the younger members of the little equine tribe would look at each other in wonder. Their elders merely sighed or cut the sod with restive hooves.

When the mountain settled in the late afternoon, the mustangs returned to their home base. Fireweed, Thistle, and Hopsage seemed cheerful. They stretched in the bloodless autumn sunlight like defanged, declawed wildcats. Talus watched them with envy. She, Draba, and Starwort were too tired to find any good in the situation. The three huddled together for warmth, their hindquarters facing the mature horses in a kind of defiance. Joy was not the appropriate response to hardship. The gale had subsided, but more inclement weather lay ahead. Why behave as though spring had come early? It didn’t occur to the fillies or the colt that happiness is often a defense. A state willfully and calculatingly chosen to ward off fear. They were still too naïve to consider emotions anything more than internal reactions to the pleasures and challenges of existence.
“That storm must have been part mole,” Starwort said from his position between Talus and Draba.

“Why?” the dunalino asked. “It made me think of a winged frost. I could feel it as it glided across the gorge just as you can feel the wake of a bird as it flies over you.”

“Because it burrowed into my bones. I can’t stop shivering.”

Draba glanced at Talus: a silent cue. Both sisters pressed their flanks against Starwort’s. The resulting heat comforted the bay yearling. He closed his eyes like a month-old foal being groomed by its mother. As the grulla smelled his contentment—a hot, milky odor at odds with the frigid spell the wind had cast upon Mount Mesteño—she tried to pinpoint the cause of his extended youth. Neither she nor Draba had remained this needy this far along in their development. But males could afford to be tardy. They didn’t have to leave their birth families until age two or three. Perhaps, contrary to the opinion she had formed while Larkspur and Fireweed battled, it would be best for her to deliver a colt. A beautiful colt she could nourish with her body and bathe with her tongue and love with her heart long after a filly would have to be weaned…

“Talus, you look funny,” Starwort said. He had opened his eyes and gazed at the grulla in surprise when her hide released its own chemical signpost—a digested grass aroma associated with the wistfulness of first-time mothers.

The young mustang tossed her forelock to conceal her embarrassment. “Do I? I can’t imagine why. You must be seeing things, you silly yearling,” she said with false good humor.

“No! You have an odd, sleepy expression on your face. Doesn’t she, Draba?”
The sisters regarded each other over Starwort's withers. “Oh,” the dunalino said, “she seems all right to me. Anyway, never mind about Talus. Tell me the story of Yarrow and the porcupine again.”

Starwort launched into a tall tale Currant’s bay roan son had passed on during the post-fight mingling of the bands. Draba listened happily. Talus suspected the flaxen-maned filly thought she could recover the spent foalhoods of Gentian, Yarrow, and Woodrush by experiencing them in an indirect fashion. But how could she? Words couldn’t recreate a newborn’s passion for life. Larkspur’s most recent offspring had grown into their legs, discovered the unique charms of each season, and, it appeared, molested porcupines, without their older siblings’ guidance. That was that.

Depressed once more, Talus ignored the bay colt’s chatter and examined Bergamot Meadow. The second she noticed the state of the aspens bordering the sward, a terrible weakness entered her. Not a single leaf had been spared by the storm. Not a single leaf. Every tree in sight stood in a pool of yellow-green foliage. They reminded Talus of gut-struck animals lying still in the heather as blood puddled around them. As blood marked the spots where they had died.

“They are bare! The aspens are bare!” the grulla cried, the horror in her voice silencing Starwort instantly.

The dunalino pointed one ear at Talus and one ear at the nearest stand of trees. Confused, she said, “What did you expect? We could hear the wind from the bottom of the gorge. Of course it was strong enough to strip the aspens.”

“How can you be so calm? Don’t you remember what Milfoil said about autumn?”

“That when the leaves change color, fall has arrived? But you prefer sparrows—”
“If your dam is right, then we have no way of knowing when it’s really, truly autumn! The leaves were killed before they turned completely yellow.”

Starwort stared at the fillies as if they had lost their minds. “Why are you all worked up over a few trees? It was hot in the summer. It’s cold now, except not as cold as it will be in the winter. That means fall is here.”

Talus stamped and showed the whites of her eyes even though Starwort’s response to her fear was perfectly reasonable. “I should have known you wouldn’t understand,” she snapped, forgetting how much she loved the little colt for an awful moment. “Hopsage never tells you anything unpleasant. I will, though. Are you ready? The roundup is coming and it’s coming without warning. Without the usual signs of autumn. From now on, we’ll have to be on the alert for danger. From now on, we’ll have no peace—only nightmares of pens and nameless ones and death by thunder-bark! You can’t even picture those things, can you? Well, once you see them for yourself, they’ll stay with you for the rest of your life. And they’ll change you.”

Starwort shrank away from Talus, his ears flattened and his eyes wide. The grulla followed him. She wasn’t finished yet. She didn’t want to be. The humans had total control over her fate. They could scatter her family. They could pluck her from Mount Mesteño. They could break her legs. But they couldn’t influence her dealings with other horses. Her dealings with colts who fancied themselves stallions even as they balked at the horrors of life…

A second later, the wind rushed from Talus’s chest. When the young mustang regained her breath, her lungs smarting as cold air flowed back into them, she found Draba shielding Starwort. The grulla, unable to believe the dunalino had kicked her, looked around for a more plausible assailant. There was none. She faced her sister again, her anger replaced by shock.
“Don’t take a single step forward,” Draba said, her soft features sharpened by a ferocity she had never displayed before.

Talus worked her ears, half-puzzled, half-curious. “What’s wrong with you?” she asked.

“I wasn’t going to hurt the colt.”

“How would I know that? You bore down on him stinking of rage.”

The dunalino shuddered at the memory. Talus recalled how ugly Spurge had grown in the pen after Currant refused to join her bandmates. The black mare had rolled her eyes and tensed her muzzle, winnowing her nostrils to red slits, until she no longer resembled herself. Perhaps Talus had undergone a similar transformation when she approached Starwort. The thought disturbed her.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the bay yearling. “I was out of line. Will you forgive me?”

“I have to. We’re bandmates,” he said after an awkward pause. The reply was more mature than Talus expected. This deepened her shame.

Pacified by her sister’s apology, Draba relaxed and retreated. Talus, her way clear, offered her nose to Starwort. The two exchanged breath to affirm their bond. Yet the grulla doubted their friendship would ever be as it was before. It wouldn’t weaken. It would just evolve, informed by the altercation.

The three young horses pressed together again. They had lived five years between them—less than any of the adults—but felt old as they thought of the coming roundup. Talus, her hysteria replaced by an intense clarity, saw Bergamot Meadow for the first time. Fear had poked, prodded, and finally pushed her senses beyond themselves. Transcendent, they detected everything from the gray light at the center of individual dewdrops to the crinkle of dry bark unspooling from the trunk of an aspen to the summery odor of stored energy liberated by decay.
The grulla knew then that she was only a single grain of soil in a vast wilderness of experience. So were her bandmates. So was Mount Mesteño itself. What solace! If she and her loved ones didn’t matter any more than a bird or a mouse or a beetle, neither did the tragedy that awaited them. No value, no loss. No loss, no pain. No pain, no struggle. Talus wanted to run through the undulating bunchgrass with complete abandon. Her new philosophy had given her a freedom the humans could never take away: the freedom to mean little and expect less.

“Draba,” Starwort said suddenly, “who will be culled?”

The dunalino’s pricked ears dropped to a neutral position. She was too tired to protect the colt from his own inquisitiveness. “We won’t know until it’s too late to protect them,” she sighed.

“Who was culled before? My mother told me Thistle’s son Lupine disappeared into the hindquarters of a nameless one.”

“Then you already have your answer—immature males.”

Starwort quieted. Talus turned an ear in his direction, interested in his reply in spite of her judgment that the trials of a few mustangs didn’t count for much. At length, he said, “I hope the humans cull immature males this year, too.”

“Why?” Draba cried, throwing up her tail in alarm. “You would be the victim in that case.”

“The band can afford to lose me more than anyone and I love the band more than I love myself.”

Talus faced Starwort. The bay yearling’s wide-set brown eyes burned with an adult wisdom. A wisdom every bit as forceful as his attachment to Hopsage, his idolization of Fireweed, and even his desire to have mares of his own someday. It seemed the grulla’s belief
that he was mentally stunted lacked a firm foundation...unless the earlier conflict had stunned him into acting his age.

The cause of Starwort’s shift in attitude was irrelevant. Talus’s reaction to it was not. While the filly gazed at her companion, at his cocked ears and high head and slim muzzle, she realized how wrong she had been to draw comfort from insignificance. She mattered. Fireweed mattered. Draba mattered. They all mattered. No one could convince her otherwise. Maybe this faith in her worth and the worth of those she cherished revealed a flaw in her character. A deep selfishness. So be it. One horse’s journey into and out of life wouldn’t leave a very deep hoofprint on the mountain, but it would leave a hoofprint. It would leave a kind of spiritual spoor future organisms could follow. Could use to track down and capture an elusive quarry: happiness or security or at least acceptance of suffering.

Talus wrenched her eyes from Starwort with difficulty—his youthful face hummed with beauty—and inspected Bergamot Meadow once more. Her senses had returned to normal. Dewdrops no longer glowed as if lit from the inside. Dead bark no longer creaked while it ribboned from the aspens. Decay smelled like decay. Yet the grulla remained in a hyperaware state. Her alertness simply wasn’t physical now. She felt rather than perceived the plants and animals around her. She felt them buzzing with their own small yet meaningful agendas. Blades of grass fought to stay upright in the breezy aftershocks of the storm. Robins and towhees rummaged through leaf litter. The horses themselves grazed with the focus of all living things bent on survival. Talus shivered with awe. She was proud to be a resident of Mount Mesteño. To be a resident of a vibrant community.

“You look funny—again,” Starwort said, reverting to his playful self.
“In what way?” Talus asked. This time she didn’t care if her emotions showed in her body language.

“You seem…big. Like a stallion who has just won a mare.”

Draba glanced at her sister. “He’s right,” she said. “What’s gotten into you?”

Talus tossed her forelock, exposing the white star Spurge thought gave her daughter a bold appearance. It did. Only the grulla didn’t know it. Otherwise she would have understood why Draba was staring at her with a strange admiration. “Nothing’s gotten into me. Nothing bad, that is. I’m close to the mountain today. Closer than I’ve been since Aster died.”

“I miss Aster. I miss her smell. It was like safety. Like a grove thick enough to keep the rain from dripping on you,” Starwort said. He sounded sad yet not bitter, not incapable of relishing his memories of the silver buckskin.

“Yes,” Draba agreed, “there was a weight to her scent. A weight as rich as water on the crown of a tree. But I miss her silence more. She could be silent even when she was speaking. Did you ever notice that?”

Talus said, “I know I did. Except I considered what you call silence stillness. She barely moved while moving. She barely breathed while breathing. It calmed me. It made me believe in places I’d never visited and mustangs I’d never met and secrets I’d never learned—”

The filly broke off in confusion. She couldn’t match strides with her thoughts. Her heart was easier to interpret. Every beat contained joy. Every beat contained gratitude. At last Talus could remember the wonders her mentor had shown her without the rumble of thunder in her ears and the glare of lightning in her eyes. The silver buckskin glided through Aspen Row like a ghost made of dirty snow, golden leaves murmuring beneath her normally soundless hooves. High on Mount Mesteño, her gray muzzle to the wind, her forelock a silky tangle, she listened and sniffed
her way to an intimate knowledge of her environment. Double Sight’s den rose from the heat-webbed clay barrens, mesmerizing in its geometry, in its total lack of resemblance to anything in the natural world. An emotion as sharp as the cry of a hawk and as expansive as a field of wildflowers seized the grulla. It was not bliss. It was not peace. It was not relief. It was all three combined to form a sentiment yet to be named.

Talus reared and whinnied. Starwort shied away, alarmed by her odd behavior. She returned to earth, bumped him with her nose, and said, “Catch me!”

The grulla wheeled into a gallop. For a moment, the bay yearling hesitated. Then he, too, charged forward. Filly and colt chased each other across Bergamot Meadow, the grass bowing before them in blue-green deference. Draba joined in a few minutes later, after her faster bandmates had lost a little of their speed. Soon even the older horses couldn’t resist the game. Thistle held out the longest, watching her companions with a sullen expression until Hopsage dashed past her at a dizzying pace. The blue roan leaped into flight, caught her fellow mare in a ground-shaking rush, and took the family on a swift tour of their home base.

In that second, a change occurred. A change as normal but necessary as the growth of a winter coat or the hardening of a foal’s bones. It came without violence, anger, or even surprise. Talus and Hopsage fell in behind Thistle side by side. They cantered in tandem for an instant prolonged by its own significance. Finally, the bay mare lowered her head in an almost imperceptible capitulation. The grulla pricked her ears and surged into second position unopposed. By the time the mustangs slowed to a jog, their breath feathering the cold air, they had accepted this rearrangement of their social system. No ill will crackled between usurper and usurped. Shifts in hierarchy are welcome when they serve the group as a whole.
Talus pulled up in the middle of the meadow. She didn’t know if she was proud or frightened. She didn’t even know what had driven her to claim Hopsage’s place in the band—the move had emerged from the instinctive part of her brain. Perhaps she, or, more accurately, her body, had sensed the bay’s physical inferiority. Regardless, something ancient had given Talus the right to advance and Hopsage the obligation to yield.

“Well,” the older horse said, ears erect in a display of good intentions, “it’s about time you asserted yourself. You’ve been stronger and swifter than me for a while now. And, with Aster’s knowledge, you’re probably smarter, too.”

“I doubt that,” Talus said generously. Hopsage dismissed the statement with a snort. The glow of relief warmed her eyes. For the first time, the grulla realized how awkward it had been for the gentle bay to run so close to the front of the band. Aster’s death, it appeared, had created an imbalance in the family, a feeling, similar to the one inspired by the sudden absence of birdsong, that something was just a bit off. Talus’s “promotion” didn’t solve the problem, but it helped.

Thistle looked over her withers and said, “No one else doubts it. You ought to have more confidence in yourself. Why, you’re on pace to become the youngest lead mare on the mountain! I won’t be surprised if you’re ready to take over from me by the age of four.”

Talus stared at the grass, embarrassed yet pleased by her friends’ faith in her. Still, she couldn’t let herself get too swept up in their praise. After all, she didn’t intend to succeed Thistle at any point, much less in a year and a half.

“Spurge would be very proud of you if she were here,” Draba said, arriving at her sister’s side, “but Aster would be even prouder.”
The grulla rotated an ear in the dunalino’s direction. She dared not turn her head. If she made eye contact, the light within her, already gaining heat and radiance, would blaze like a forest fire. Like a terrible flame.
The roundup approached. At first it lacked definition, closing in on the mustangs as silently and gradually as nightfall. But it soon acquired shape, smell, and color. Each horse conceived of the threat in different terms. Fireweed envisioned a pen built out of equine muscle, bone, and sinew. Draba imagined a mountain lion whose fur gleamed like a silver bird and whose growls sounded like her own labored breathing. Thistle peered into the cavernous hindquarters of the nameless one that had taken Lupine from her, Hopsage into the dark glade her life would become if Starwort were culled. The colt himself, unable to picture what he hadn’t experienced, simply considered the danger a cloud with a long shadow.

Only Talus recognized the demon that bore down upon her. It was a horse. A filly on the cusp of adulthood. An almost-mare with a coat the complex gray of a storm and a burden she couldn’t quite buck off. As she advanced, the burden resolved into a foal. The tiny creature lay limp and lifeless, slung across her back like the object “Tucker” called a saddle. It didn’t look familiar, but it smelled of brash Bitterroot and sweet Penstemon, of surly Vetch and noble Aster.

The awful image didn’t scare Talus. She had expelled all her fear on Bergamot Meadow, during her verbal attack on Starwort. And so, her heart empty of everything but dread, she watched the demon draw closer and closer with bizarre equanimity. Hers was the peace of a prey animal who has run from a predator until it can run no more, who swings around to face its pursuer with gratitude in its breast, wildly, aggressively alive in its final moments. It sees at last that its entire existence has been practice. Preparation for the greatest battle it will ever fight. It is satisfied.
Talus’s composure disturbed her bandmates. In spite of their determination to live their lives as naturally and joyfully as possible, they spooked at every rustle in the grass and sigh in the trees. Even stalwart Thistle often teetered on the verge of madness, rolling her eyes at phantom enemies. This general hysteria made Talus seem menaciously complacent in the face of the roundup. Soon every mustang, desperate to understand her mood and therefore the impact she would have on the group when the silver birds arrived, claimed to know the source of her calm.

“She’s a stallion before combat, standing still to save his energy as his opponent advances,” Fireweed said.

“She’s a mare with foal who senses her water is about to break,” Thistle said.

“She’s a mare with a dead foal, unable to think for grief,” Hopsage said.

“She’s crazy. She’s lost her mind. Do we all get like that when the humans come?” Starwort said.

Draba alone recognized what had happened to Talus. The grulla had entered the dormant state that precedes transformation. Like a caterpillar who could emerge from its cocoon as either a healthy butterfly or something half-formed, she might shake off her torpor a leader or just another mustang. The dunalino hoped for the former but willed herself to love whichever horse seized control of her sister. Like Milfoil and Spurge, the two fillies had established a bond that would waver from time to time yet never break. Never fade.

The days shortened and passed, shortened and passed. Finally the middle of fall arrived. Mount Mesteño, caught in a battle between the flagging chestnut stud of summer and the increasingly confident gray stallion of winter, neither warmed nor chilled. In Bergamot Meadow, the grass browned yet refused to yield to the frost already sparkling on the summit. To the north,
in the aspen thickets near the mineral lick, the trees thrust their leafless branches into a pallid sky. To the south, the water in the willow-lined spring coursed over stones and around driftwood, cold but still ice-free. Still swift. The basin in the east waited for precipitation to replenish the wallow in its center, the gorge for wind to hurtle over it in frigid gusts once again.

The mountain reflected—or influenced—the mustangs’ behavior. Each horse felt trapped between forces larger than itself. Felt unable to retreat or press on. Frozen in place, the bandmates could only watch as the roundup hove into view and fixed them with its hateful gaze. Fireweed pretended to be brave on trembling legs. Thistle wished for Aster’s intelligence and courage. Hopsage stayed close to Starwort, Starwort to Hopsage. Draba heard her lungs whistle and shuddered. Far away, in her own quiet universe, Talus stirred.
The roundup fell on the most beautiful day of the season. Summer, his vision misted by exhaustion, his legs unsteady as a foal’s, gathered himself for a final rush. Mount Mesteño responded. The sun rolled into a sky the rich blue of a scrub jay’s nape, dew moistened the brittle grass in Bergamot Meadow, and ground squirrels already fighting the sleepy pull of hibernation darted from their burrows with their old bluster. Even the air regained the lazy vitality it had enjoyed during the warmer months, swapping its cold bite for a muted, vaguely floral quality. No animal suspected the peace that had settled on the mountain, a shimmering mantle of light and birdsong and chatter in the brush, would die a violent death within the hour. Not the sheep, not the deer, not the pronghorns, not the mustangs, who had the most to fear.

When the hum of silver wings reached Talus and her bandmates, they were above the treeline, at the mineral lick. Thistle did what Spurge had done almost two years earlier. What every lead mare on Mount Mesteño was doing now. She ran for cover, drawing her family downhill into the nearest aspen grove. The horses huddled together and pricked their ears. Draba, who had positioned herself on the eastern edge of the little forest, located the threat first.

“The noise is coming from Larkspur’s range,” she said, her voice small and thin. Talus wanted to go to her, to listen to the sound of Spurge’s capture beside the one mustang in equal pain. But Thistle stood to the grulla’s right, her white-ticked shoulder barring the way. Nor was movement wise under the circumstances. Starwort looked ready to bolt at the slightest provocation. Talus would have to mourn her natal band’s freedom on her own. She recalled Larkspur’s hoary muzzle and Spurge’s distended belly. Did the aging leaders have enough strength between them to protect Milfoil, Currant, and the three yearlings? Probably not. Yet
both would sacrifice themselves for the group if necessary. *Keep my parents safe and I’ll never ask for anything again,* Talus thought, addressing the mountain though she knew it, too, was powerless before the humans.

“Stay still,” Thistle said. She eyeballed the grulla with special concentration as she delivered the order. “Any horse who leaves the grove will feel my teeth.”

“We can’t just stand here. We’ll lose our heads,” Hopsage said. Her coat stank of barely contained panic. Starwort was even worse off.

“We can and we will. Now be brave. Courage is less dangerous than fear.”

Fireweed gazed at each member of his family in turn—Talus suspected he knew his large brown eyes had a calming effect on other mustangs—and said, “Thistle speaks the truth. We must be as silent and motionless as possible. If we aren’t, the silver bird will spot us from above and flush us from the trees.”

Draba asked, “It’ll find us no matter what, won’t it? At least once it swoops closer to the earth?”

“No,” Fireweed said with an emphatic stamp of his hoof. “The aspens will hide us with or without leaves.”

Talus glanced up at the trees and realized Fireweed was lying to soothe his bandmates. The bare branches met overhead but didn’t intertwine enough to obscure the horses. Only one place on Mount Mesteño offered adequate protection from the humans: the mahogany thicket. Talus pictured it crouched just below the pass, its evergreen foliage a dense mat that would obliterate any animal who sought refuge in its shade. She could almost smell the bittersweet perfume of those leaves.
“Fireweed, I don’t want to argue,” Draba began, too honest to sense her mate’s calculated
deceit in spite of her quick mind, “I really don’t—”

“Then hold your tongue,” the stallion said before she could finish.

Hopsage cried, “Let her talk! She’s smarter than any of us! She may have a solution.”

“Do you, Draba?” Thistle demanded.

The dunalino pinned her ears. “I didn’t say I did. I said this won’t work.”

“See?” the blue roan snapped, whirling on her bay friend. “She doesn’t know anything!
That’ll teach you to doubt your leaders.”

“Please stop fighting. It scares me when you fight,” Starwort said, pressing his flank
against Hopsage’s for comfort.

Talus listened to her family squabble from a great distance. She recognized that the ties
between her companions were fraying under the pressure of the roundup yet felt no alarm. No
dread. Her passivity confused her. She couldn’t follow the changes going on inside her, couldn’t
tell her calm would drop from her like loose snakeskin in another moment.

“Quiet, all of you!” Fireweed said, his gentle demeanor yielding to anger. “I can’t hear
the bird’s wingbeats over your racket.”

“Why bother to track its movements if you won’t let us leave the aspens?” Hopsage
asked in such a mocking tone the red dun flexed his muzzle as though eager to bite her.

Thistle’s temper burned even more brightly than Fireweed’s. “Don’t talk to your stallion
like that! He’s your protector and the sire of your unborn foal.”

“Our foals,” Draba moaned. “Our foals will never gallop through the sagebrush or taste
fresh bunchgrass or fall in love with the wind. Only their blood will remember the mountain.”
Talus’s body reacted to the tragic prospect. The muscles around the grulla’s womb clenched with surprising force. They seemed to have a will of their own. An intense drive to guard the half-formed progeny of Talus and Fireweed against harm. Yet the filly’s mind was racing west, through the leafless trees that studded the upper elevations, past the juniper belt where the big cats prowled, across the river whose swift current had overpowered Starwort, up to the pit in which Aster’s bones crumbled, up to the cirque in which the mustangs had made their lives for a year, up to the thicket in which a desperate creature could lose its enemies...

The route had the murky quality of a dream perfectly balanced between longing and nightmare. A single well-placed—or careless—hoofstep could decide the band’s fate. But what was the alternative? Hopsage and Draba spoke the truth. An aspen grove stripped of its leaves wouldn’t save the mustangs. It would only delay their inevitable capture. Their inevitable loss of freedom, and, therefore, identity.

“Thistle, Fireweed, I have an idea,” Talus said, her voice so steady compared to her friends’ that all arguments ceased. “Aster showed me a mahogany thicket on the Other Side last spring. It’s thick. Too thick for a silver bird to pierce with either its eyes or its talons.”

The blue roan peered at the summit. Her ears signed doubt. “The Other Side? How are we supposed to get to the Other Side? How did you get to the Other Side?”

“Aster led me through a pass about a mile above the cirque.”

Five heads jerked back in surprise. Somewhere downhill, in the lowlands, a murder of crows leaped into the air with a tremendous clatter. The sound, sudden and jumbled, echoed the horses’ shock at Talus’s proposal.

Fireweed recovered first. “You want us to go all the way to the cirque? We’d never make it. The humans would spot us and herd us into the pen,” he said.
“That’s possible,” the grulla confessed, still perplexed by her self-possession. “Shouldn’t we try, though? We’ll be caught if we stay here. You can’t deny it.”

Fireweed faced Thistle, his sleek red body taut with both fear and hope. “What do you think? Can you guide us to our old range?” he asked.

The lead mare stared at her bandmates. Talus, acquainted with internal struggles herself, recognized that Thistle’s heart had turned into a battleground. This recognition chipped away at the young mustang’s composure. Her pulse accelerated as she waited for the blue roan to say something, as she mentally ordered the blue roan to disregard her concerns and take the group to the cirque. *Do it. Do it for Lupine and Witchgrass and Witchgrass’s son. Do it for your future colts and fillies. Do it so no one else has to. So I don’t have to.*

“Oh, Fireweed,” Thistle said at last, her burly frame wilting like a flower at the end of its brief, bright life, “I can’t. I’m brave and fast enough, but I lack the skill to reach the Other Side without drawing the humans’ attention. Aster alone could do that.”

Fireweed wilted as well. As the energy left him, his coat dulled and his muscles lost their definition. Even the scars from his fight with Larkspur seemed diminished. They no longer served as evidence of his courage, of blows received without flinching, of fatigue experienced without despair. Instead, they highlighted his flaws: the youth, impatience, and temper that had put him in the path of a hoof or a set of teeth in the first place. Talus realized how much of his strength came from the motive force inside him with the dull, distant surprise of the imperiled. Who was this clay-colored stallion so humbled by life? Surely not the bold sire of her foal and protector of her family…

“Well, Aster was one of a kind. There isn’t any shame in not measuring up to her,” Fireweed said to Thistle with as much kindness as he could muster given the situation.
The blue roan’s eyes gleamed and hardened. “A thousand mustangs will live, die, and decay before the mountain produces her equal,” she said.

“You’re wrong,” Draba said quietly. “The mountain has already produced her equal—Talus. Talus can lead us to the thicket. Talus can save us from the silver bird.”

Hopsage pricked her ears and cried, “That’s right! Aster wouldn’t have chosen her if she couldn’t get us to safety. Talus will deliver us. Talus, our storm without rain!”

The horses looked at the grulla, not as individual animals linked by common wants, needs, and goals, but as a single organism. A single mass of hope. Of expectation. Talus had anticipated this moment. Had known, deep down, that her bandmates would turn to her when the roundup arrived. Yet, confronted by their trust in her, a trust born of desperation more than genuine faith in her abilities, she felt unprepared and unworthy to gallop before them. It didn’t occur to her that all leaders doubt themselves at first, that fifteen years earlier, spry young Aster had trembled at the thought of guiding her fellows. Of having power over them. The power to defend or destroy their precious lives.

Convinced that her hesitation was a sign of inadequacy rather than a natural response to being asked to rise to the occasion, Talus surrendered to a fear as intense as her companions’ desire for her to take charge. It stripped away the remnants of the peace the others had found disturbing in a gut-chilling, hide-shaking second. Sweat dampened the hair behind the filly’s ears. Worse, her legs trembled as they hadn’t trembled since the day of her birth, when hunger compelled her to stand. If only the world were as simple as it was that morning. If only no problems existed that couldn’t be solved by a belly full of milk.

“Talus, what’s the matter? Are you ill?” Thistle inquired in an uncharacteristically gentle voice.
“Why isn’t she saying anything?” Hopsage cried. “Why isn’t she doing anything?”

Talus couldn’t see, smell, or hear her bandmates. She was far away. She was many places at once. She stood beside Penstemon, straining to catch the old chestnut’s last words, the message for Currant no one had received or delivered. She faced the humans as they bore down on Bitterroot, the hatred in her heart redder than exposed muscle. She watched earthquakes of grief roll through Vetch’s body after the dun colt vanished into the nameless one. She sniffed baby Woodrush in the creek-split meadow, recognizing the olfactory signatures of Spurge and Larkspur yet unable to believe such powerful mustangs could create something so small. She begged Aster to leap from the pit, begged her as if the elderly mare had given up on life, not accepted that it had to go on without her. The filly feared her spine, groaning under the weight of her guilt, would bend and snap like a wind-tortured branch.

Talus might have completed her transformation right then, might have trampled her foalhood dream to death at last, if Draba hadn’t interceded. The dunalino, in the most generous act of an existence marked by generosity, pushed past Fireweed, Starwort, Hopsage, and Thistle, reached her sister, and extended her delicate, pink-skinned muzzle. It touched Talus’s cheek as softly and tenderly as a willow catkin ripples still water or a bee alights upon the pollen-rich center of a daisy. The grulla blinked. Suddenly she wasn’t in the company of Penstemon and Bitterroot, Woodrush and Aster, but her current family. The family with which she would begin, and, she hoped, end her years as a mare. As a capable adult horse.

“If any mustang can lead us to the thicket, you can.” Draba said, so near that Talus could count her golden eyelashes. “I know it. So do our bandmates. So did Aster. Maybe the mountain does, too. Maybe the mountain will lend you its strength.”
The mountain. The mountain didn’t know Talus, much less whether she could guide her band to safety. At least not in the way animals know things: with their whiskers, noses, eyes, and ears. Yet its strength was in the grulla because it had sustained and challenged her since she first gazed upon it in wonder. And because, if she interpreted its moods correctly, as Aster had taught her, she just might get to the Other Side with her family intact. Even now, her senses honed to a point by the coming of the humans, she felt very close to the land that had witnessed her joy and her sorrow. The crows were gone, but smaller, sweeter birds filled the silence left behind with reedy music. Bushtits spread breathy rumors, finches hurled melodic slurs at one another, and waxwings purred in the juniper belt. Meanwhile deer, their coats emitting a raunchy musk, wandered the sagebrush scrub in search of mates. Did the stags’ antlers tingle with anticipation, with the frightful thrill of skull-to-skull combat? Talus longed to find out. Perhaps she would during some future rutting season. But, for the time being, she couldn’t afford to guess at what went on in her fellow creatures’ hearts.

“I’m not a mountain. I’m not a storm without rain. I’m a mustang. My speed, intelligence, and courage have limits. They might not be enough to save us. I might not be enough to save us. Still, I’ll do my best to beat the silver bird to the pass,” she said.

“Why, Talus,” Thistle began, her ears pricked and her head tilted slightly, “your best is all we ask. All we would ever ask of a lead mare. Don’t you know that?”

As the grulla listened, as the truth of the blue roan’s words grew apparent, the dead foal slid off her back and tumbled to the earth, laid to rest at last. The transformation was over. Talus was the horse Spurge hoped she would be, the horse Draba had admired from the moment their dams introduced them, the horse Fireweed loved for her rugged beauty and bold tread, the horse Aster trusted to turn tragedy into greatness.
“Not before now,” Talus said. She couldn’t believe it had taken her so long to realize that lead mares are not defined by their talent, but their willingness to give all of themselves to the group. Spurge’s “defeat” of the bachelors, Aster’s jump from the rim of the cirque, and her own evolution into a leader were made possible by love more than ability. Love for mates and foals, siblings and friends. Love for freedom, for every mustang’s right to leave its bones in a wild place.

The grulla mellowed once again. This time her peacefulness didn’t upset her or her family. It was a different kind of serenity, the serenity of an animal who knows that only concentration of the highest order can save her life and the lives dearest to her. It was the charged repose of a vixen crouched in her burrow while a dog scratches at the entrance, ready to fight for her kits as soon as the intruder’s wet nose enters striking range. It was the stillness of a male bighorn analyzing a rival, his head lowered and his horizontal pupils dilated. It was the clear-mindedness that would deliver the horses to the thicket—with luck and cooperation.

Talus pricked her ears. The drone of the silver bird had decreased in volume. Had the humans finished driving Spurge’s band to the clay barrens and into the pen no doubt gleaming in the autumn sunlight? Would they return for more mustangs immediately? Either way, the grulla would have to set off at a brisk pace. She glanced at the earth beneath her hooves. Old leaves covered the soil. They would slow her down.

“We need to travel as far as we can while the two-leggeds are in the barrens,” the filly said. “This mulch will impede our progress. We’ll have to break from the grove and run along but not under the aspens until the bird comes back to the upper elevations. Then we’ll hide in the trees and catch our breath.”
Talus studied her companions. Fear brightened their eyes and soured their coats. They had never looked more vulnerable. Thistle and Fireweed stood at attention, their powerful bodies trembling with restrained terror as they waited for the young mustang’s next move. Hopsage pushed her nose into Starwort’s neck as if her touch alone could protect him. The colt leaned into the contact. Draba watched the bays with uncharacteristic jealousy; perhaps she thought her weak lungs couldn’t withstand a stiff gallop to the cirque, that she and her offspring would die together. Yet the grulla refused to let such a thing happen to her sister or any of her bandmates. She would overextend her heart and drop dead before she lost a family member.

Talus trotted to the edge of the grove, lifted her beautiful slate-colored head, and cried, “Follow me!” Then she burst into the open, not because she wanted glory or redemption or even security for herself, but because the horses at her heels were as important to her as Mount Mesteño itself. They were the wind in her mane, the sun on her flanks, the grass under her feet. The silence of dawn.
The treeline—a series of aspen groves that extended from Bistort’s old range to the juniper belt where the mountain lion roamed—stretched out in front of Talus like a path to safety. She ran next to it, her hooves barely touching the firm, leafless soil. Behind her came Thistle, Hopsage, Starwort, Draba, and Fireweed. The grulla pointed one ear backward, reading her bandmates’ moods in their footfalls. Thistle pounded the earth with the confidence of a mare restored to her natural role in her family, Hopsage with relief to be in motion, Starwort with the guilty excitement of a youngster in danger, Draba with her usual caution, and Fireweed with the powerful rhythm of a stallion determined to protect his mates. No one, it appeared, was tired yet. Talus accelerated.

As the filly lengthened her stride, she extended her senses just like Aster had taught her during their visit to the summit. Her awareness seemed to billow above and around her body, taking in everything from the russet flash of a coyote to the breezy complaint of a robin to the stink of an abandoned kill. An enormous, invisible cobweb might have settled on her, a cobweb that pulled sights, sounds, and smells to its glittering breast. In this heightened state, Talus could tell the silver bird still hovered over the clay barrens. Maybe Spurge had evaded capture longer than expected. Maybe she was weaving in and out of the sagebrush in a desperate bid to save her friends, her cause, if not her fate, the same as her daughter’s.

“Talus,” Thistle said, putting on a burst of speed to draw even with the two-year-old, “slow down a little. Hopsage, Starwort, and Draba will exhaust themselves before we get to the pass.”

“They’re not working very hard right now,” the grulla said.
“They’re working harder than you, me, and Fireweed are. Trust me. We can move quickly without using up the weaker horses too soon.”

Talus hesitated until she remembered Aster’s words the previous winter: “Every lead mare must know the strengths and weaknesses of her companions in order to keep them safe.” Thistle, one of the most athletic mustangs on the mountain, had spent her life exploring—and often transcending—physical limitations. She could tell when her fellow horses were pushing themselves too much or too little better than most in spite of her inobservant nature.

“All right,” the grulla said, checking herself, “I believe you.” She wanted to add, I have to, don’t I?, but there was no point. Aster had told her that every band member plays an important role in the group, that a leader must put her faith in her followers as readily as they put their faith in her.

This shared faith heartened Talus. As she galloped past aspen after aspen, her black mane feathered by a cool mid-morning breeze, her healthy pink lungs taking in and expelling air with the measured cadence of an animal born to run, she sensed her bandmates’ gifts more than ever. Thistle’s strength, Hopsage’s kindness, Starwort’s determination, Draba’s intelligence, and Fireweed’s courage licked at her hocks like a tremendous flame. A flame that spurred her on with its warmth rather than threatened her with its powers of destruction. Surely, if she and her companions pooled their talents, they could make it to the thicket. They might have to break themselves—and their spirits—to get there, but get there they would. A delicious hope surged through Talus. She fought back the urge to cry, “Cirque and tarn, summit and wind, bones of Aster, we’re coming home!”

At that very instant, all six mustangs heard the most terrifying sound known to their kind: the chop of a silver bird’s wings. The grulla’s gray ears shot up and swiveled. They sifted
through a vast array of noises, the thick hair inside them prickling with information, until the humans’ location became clear. The two-leggeds were over the middle elevations several miles to the east. Soon they would fly higher in search of their next victims. Talus and her family would be visible if they remained in the open.

“Veer left,” the filly called, ducking into the trees. Thistle shadowed her, Hopsage shadowed Thistle, Starwort shadowed Hopsage, Draba shadowed Starwort, and Fireweed shadowed Draba. Under different circumstances, the horses would have delighted in their synchronicity, in their ability to move like a school of trout.

Talus eased to a canter, then a walk, then a standstill. She glanced over her withers and said, “The silver bird is on its way. Stick to the aspens no matter what.”

“But Talus,” Draba panted, not yet exhausted but tired enough that the grulla was glad she had listened to Thistle, “bare branches won’t hide us.”

“They will from a distance. When the humans close in...Well, we’ll deal with that when it’s time.”

Hopsage said, “So we’re just staying where we are? I don’t think I can bear complete motionlessness.”

“No. We have to go on—as quietly as possible. Everybody, be silent for a moment. I need to concentrate,” Talus replied.

The young mustang sniffed the leaves she could no longer avoid. During their trip to the Row, Aster had shown her how much rustling mulch makes underfoot. A careless step could alarm a deer, elk, or turkey, sending it rushing from the trees and drawing the silver bird’s attention.
As Talus inhaled the rich, dark musk of the forest floor, she noticed that the leaves on the outskirts of the treeline were wet. Less protected from the elements, they must have been soaked by rainfall. The grulla placed her right front hoof on a swathe of dead foliage so damp it had blackened and stuck to the earth. It creaked beneath her weight, but not loudly enough to startle even the most timorous creatures.

“Step only on moist leaves for the next mile,” Talus said, lifting her head and snorting to rid her nasal passages of the sour-sweet smell of rotting plant matter.


Talus ignored the colt. She didn’t have time to explain Aster’s lessons. This one would be especially difficult for her bandmates to grasp; horses rely on speed more often than stealth when danger arrives.

The filly set off at a slow pace. Each step required concentration. If she put a foot down in the wrong spot, her companions, mimicking her movements, would as well. The mental strain was almost unbearable. Every crackle in the leaf litter made her shiver and shake. Every whisper of feathers in the branches above her turned her stomach. Don’t fly, she implored the jays, robins, and sparrows watching the mustangs pass through reptilian eyes. Don’t give our position away. A few birds looked at Talus and folded their wings as if they understood her predicament. They didn’t. Not even the grulla comprehended the enormity of the situation. She had waited for the roundup to come for too long. It had devolved into an abstraction. Into a dream that happened to have real-life consequences.

Yet there was nothing abstract about the horses strung out behind Talus. She rotated her ears to check on them. Draba had stopped breathing heavily. Perhaps being forced to travel at a
crawl would help the band in the end. Perhaps the energy the mustangs saved in the aspens would carry them to the Other Side.

When Talus reached the final grove, beyond which lay open country, she paused and said, “Hush, I need to listen.”

Thistle, Fireweed, and the rest obeyed. The filly extended her senses again. She heard a mole surface in the wood and sift through leaves with its leathery forepaws. She heard a kestrel’s talons close on a mouse somewhere in the lowlands. She heard silver wings revolve, stirring the air above Mount Mesteño as they bore their owner—and their owners’ passengers—west at high speed. The terrible bird would appear within minutes.

“Stay where you are,” Talus said as Hopsage, Starwort, Draba, and even Thistle began to lash their tails with rising panic. They had also detected the threat, though not with the grulla’s accuracy.

“Can’t we run south into the juniper belt?” Hopsage asked.

“There’s not enough time,” Talus said. “We wouldn’t make it to the junipers before the bird spotted us. But if we keep still and it doesn’t swoop too close to the trees, we have a chance.”

Hopsage pricked her ears to show she understood. Her eyes betrayed less certainty. They shifted from side to side with tiny, rapid movements. For a second, Talus thought they had developed a will of their own and were looking for a way out of the bay mare’s head. Of course, that wasn’t the case. Hopsage merely sensed the challenge she and her bandmates faced. To remain motionless while danger approached...Few horses could conceive of such a strategy, much less execute it. Talus didn’t even know if she herself could fight the primal urge to run once those strange wings churned the air above her.
The mustangs pressed together for solace as the humans came on. Thistle’s shoulder, a wall of quivering muscle, rubbed against the grulla’s right flank. The unexpected intimacy reminded the filly of the earliest days of her life. Of the days in which need tethered her to Spurge. How wonderful it had been to lean into her dam’s body, to shed her fear of the astoundingly bright, complex, and enormous world as she did so. Where was the black mare now? Where was the safety she represented? Had it existed in the first place? Maybe mothers simply pretend they can defend their offspring from the threats hidden in every shadow, every dark thicket and lonely glade. Maybe she, Talus, was simply pretending she could defend her family from the humans.

“Are you okay?” Thistle asked. “I can feel you trembling.”

“I can feel you trembling,” Talus replied. The horses glanced at each other, not sure if they should laugh at or mourn their common terror. *All mustangs, the grulla told herself, are foals before the roundup. Before its awesome power over their lives.*

The bird appeared, its silver wings spinning, its silver talons bared, its silver tail glittering with silver malice.

Fireweed said, his voice as audacious as a summer wind, “Be brave and follow your lead mare’s orders. She knows what she’s doing.”

The red dun’s courage sustained his bandmates for several minutes. While the bird flew closer and closer to the aspens, all of the horses, even the highstrung ones, maintained their composure. In that brief period of calm, it occurred to Talus that she had everything she ever wanted. She was a lead mare. She was Fireweed’s lead mare. Yet she didn’t care anymore. Or at least she no longer valued the prestige of the position. Only the well-being of her family
mattered. Only the well-being of her sweet-tempered sister and her beautiful mate and the life preparing itself for life in the bloody sanctuary of her womb.

The bird reached the open area above the treeline, climbed high into the sky, and hovered in place. All six mustangs pinned their ears in a futile attempt to drown out the creature’s wingbeats. The sound sliced through their delicate pinnae and tunneled into their heads. Talus recalled the sensation from the previous roundup; she felt as if a thousand bees were dashing themselves against the back of her skull. They wouldn’t stop until they reduced their soft bodies to feebly stirring tatters. The filly closed her eyes. Temporary blindness steadied her, but only a little. She still ached to run. To run from the humans and the noise destroying her from the inside out. Her legs trembled with desire for their one great love: motion.

“Talus,” Thistle said, her limbs shaking just as dramatically, “Hopsage, Starwort, and Draba are in trouble!”

The grulla peered over the blue roan’s withers. It seemed Hopsage’s anxiety had spread to Starwort and Draba. The three horses quaked like rabbits transfixed by the yellow gaze of a coyote. Fireweed talked to them with a quiet urgency, explaining the consequences of panic under pressure again and again in case his words didn’t penetrate their stupor the first time. After a moment, he looked at Talus and Thistle in despair.

“If they bolt, should I give chase or let them go?” the stallion asked.

Fireweed was utterly helpless and Thistle lacked the mental acuity to make such an important decision. The choice belonged to Talus and Talus alone. She couldn’t bear to lose any of her bandmates. Yet if the red dun attempted to recover Hopsage, Starwort, and Draba, the bird would realize that more mustangs huddled beneath the trees. The worst sadness Talus had experienced since Aster’s death slowed her pulse to a rhythmic thud. She would have to break
her unspoken pact with Draba. The pact that had strengthened their bond in the wake of the mountain lion attack: *We live together or die together.*

“I suppose we have no option but—” the grulla began, only to cut herself off.

Thistle said, “No option but what? Don’t you freeze up on us, too.”

Talus ignored the blue roan, focusing her attention on Hopsage instead. The bay mare’s best quality, according to Aster, was her gentle nature. Her kindness. Perhaps her sensitivity to the needs of others would counterbalance her sensitivity to danger.

“Hopsage, we’re scared,” Talus said. “Tell us something pleasant. Something happy.”

Fireweed pricked his ears when he grasped Talus’s plan. “Yes, Hopsage! Tell us what we’ll do when we return to our territory after the roundup.”

The bay’s fear-glazed eyes cleared at the request. Her muscles also relaxed, shedding their nervous energy and growing as static as lake water on a windless day. Finally the mare turned to her son, nipped his forelock affectionately, and said, “Starwort, listen to me. You, too, Draba. I know our band’s future. It’s a good future. And I’ll share it with you now.”

The yearling and the dunalino stopped quaking. Talus shot Fireweed a hopeful glance. Hopsage had mastered her terror of the bird much more quickly than expected. The grulla’s heart tingled with pride and love as the bay mare launched into her tale with the pluck of the compassionate.

“Tomorrow the roundup will be a memory,” Hopsage said, her voice as soothing as the drip of melting snow, “a distant memory. One that skims but doesn’t ripple the surface of our minds. We’ll return to our range at an easy pace, tired but happy. So happy! By the time we reach Bergamot Meadow, the sun will have gone down and left some of itself behind in the
evening sky. We’ll stand in that last bit of red light, our coats, manes, and tails gleaming. Then
we’ll sleep. We’ll sleep like foals.”

As Talus listened to Hopsage’s vision, the thrum of the bird’s wings faded and yielded to
the sounds of Mount Mesteño at dusk. Coyotes sang songs too plaintive to originate from the
same world that produced the sweet chatter of bushtits or the burbling solace of a creek. Deer
turned fallen leaves with their small, split hooves. A nighthawk not yet ready to seek warmer
climes cried its buzzy cry and waited in vain for an answer. Talus was in the meadow with her
bandmates. She would always be in the meadow with her bandmates, damp grass at her feet and
a russet glow in the west.

“Winter will come—a winter so mild we won’t grow shaggy at all,” Hopsage continued.
“We’ll stay plump and shiny long after the mountain goes white. Our young will be just as
healthy. When they arrive in the spring, find their legs, and gaze about with the most complete
wonder a horse can experience, we’ll cherish them instantly. We’ll cherish them even more than
we cherish our freedom because they are what makes our freedom matter. What makes it
desirable.”

Far away, in the meadow where she planned to spend the rest of her days, Talus lifted her
head and cocked her ears. Her consciousness rushed back into her body. Into reality. The bird’s
position had changed; the humans controlling it from inside its ribcage had jerked its beak to the
east. Had they detected another group of mustangs? Were Bistort and his friends nearby? Talus
looked at Fireweed. He had noticed the directional adjustment as well. Everyone else stared at
Hopsage, oblivious.

“Summer will follow,” Hopsage went on, nuzzling Starwort and Draba as if they were
only a few months old, “but it won’t end. Nothing will ever end again. The sun will warm us to
the bone. The migrants will forget about their other homes and make their lives here. The wildflowers will blaze for all time, like stars. Like stars so lovely the sky grew jealous and banished them to Mount Mesteño, where they put down roots…”

Hopsage broke off, stunned by her own powers of imagination. In the silence that fell over the grove, Talus heard the silver bird depart in pursuit of its latest victims. She glanced at Fireweed. He twitched his ears to signal that he knew what they had to do next and the role he would play in it. The grulla blew air through her nose in relief. Her mate’s intelligence was as great a comfort as his strength.

Talus walked to the edge of the trees and took stock of her surroundings. The juniper belt lay a mile to the south. That mile was almost entirely bare; only a few wind-battered shrubs added color to the gravely mountain soil. The mustangs would have to sprint the second leg of their journey—or risk being caught in the open if the humans lost sight of their current quarry and doubled back to the aspens. Talus tensed like a predator about to fling herself at an unsuspecting fawn. She hoped Fireweed could keep the mares together as their varying speeds caused them to string out and separate. It would be a challenge for an experienced band stallion, much less one whose first foals had yet to arrive. But Aster’s insistence that her charge pay close attention to the red dun had borne fruit. The grulla didn’t just understand Fireweed’s habits and how they reflected the safety status of the band. She also understood the awesome scope of his courage. Of his willingness to suffer for his family. His determination would deliver the horses to the junipers as a unit. It had to.

“Run as fast as you can,” Talus said, and leaped from the grove.
CHAPTER 55

The grulla hurtled downhill, her mane and tail streaming in a wind generated by her own wild descent. Heavy footfalls told her that Thistle wasn’t far behind. However, the lighter steps of Hopsage, Starwort, and Draba already sounded faint. Perhaps the three more timid mustangs had hesitated to leave the trees. Talus mentally upbraided herself for not anticipating her companions’ behavior. *Stupid, thoughtless filly. Are you or aren’t you a lead mare?*

“Don’t worry. Fireweed will take good care of our bandmates,” Thistle panted. “You just focus on picking out the best route to the junipers.”

The blue roan was right. Talus had to concentrate on her duties and let Fireweed concentrate on his. Yet she couldn’t help but check on the progress of the stragglers. Every three or four strides, she pointed her ears backward to listen to the developments unfolding at the rear of the group. The hoofwork that reached her painted a picture of disorientation in her head. Hopsage had veered to the left, Starwort to the right. Meanwhile Draba galloped in a straight line, striving in vain to narrow the gap between her and her swifter comrades.

Another set of feet—Fireweed’s—beat a complex tattoo on the dirt. Talus heard the red dun charge after Hopsage, bite her hip to send her scuttling toward Draba, and tear off in the direction of Starwort. The colt, stupid with fear, was still running the wrong way at top speed. Fireweed accelerated, the intervals between his hoofbeats shortening as he asked his body for more. It reacted. He drew even with the bay yearling and nipped him into formation. The band was intact again. Talus wanted to buck and squeal. As long as the horses stayed together, they would make it to the juniper belt well before the bird swung west once more.

“Talus, watch where you’re going!” Thistle cried.
The grulla redirected her attention to the land in front of her. Two stags were bounding up the mountain…and into her path. They didn’t see her. Lust had fogged their senses. She whinnied to announce herself and her family. They continued to advance. One buck outpaced the other and wheeled to meet his rival with lowered antlers. Talus whinnied a second time. At last the deer noticed her. They sprang to the side bleating in alarm and indignation.

The first stag, who had to cut short his charge as well as avoid the onrushing mustangs, wasn’t quick enough. He cleared Talus but not Thistle. She braked hard. Terrified by the large blue form barreling straight at him, he panicked and darted to the left. The move carried him past Thistle into the heart of the band. Chaos followed. Hopsage, Starwort, Draba, and even Fireweed spooked at the buck’s unexpected appearance. The order the red dun had imposed minutes earlier dissolved.

Talus rotated her ears, gleaning information from the soundscape behind her. Fireweed had regained his composure. He would need it to gather his runaway mares. The grulla slowed down to give him a better chance of unifying the group. Thistle did the same. Neither would forget what happened next.

Fireweed pulled up, marshaled his energy, and launched into flight. He raced over the rocky earth with the daring of a bighorn sheep, the ferocity of a mountain lion, and the high-headed, high-tailed pride of his own kind. Talus realized he was attempting to circle the family, herding his companions into a tight bunch in the process. Few stallions could execute the maneuver. It called for both raw power and dazzling finesse. Larkspur himself balked at the challenge. Yet Larkspur was no Fireweed. At least not in terms of courage.

The red dun approached the scattered band from the right. He flew by Draba and Starwort, who had fled to the northwest. They altered course in response. Talus rolled an eye
toward Thistle. The blue roan galloped a horse length away, her bulk increasing her momentum as she entered the final half mile of the descent to the junipers. She and the grulla would be harder to catch.

Talus tracked Fireweed’s progress with another swivel of her ears. The red dun closed on Thistle at a speed not many mustangs could touch, his hooves sending tremors through the hard dirt. He reached the blue roan’s hip, then her barrel, then her withers. At last his beautiful face appeared on the periphery of Talus’s vision. The veins between his eye and muzzle bulged with effort, each one a single thread in a web of blood. His nostrils opened so wide every time he inhaled that their pink lining caught the sun. Running usually emptied the grulla’s mind. Reduced her to a body on the move, all legs and lungs and heart. Yet thought after thought ghosted across her brain as her mate advanced. Would he make it? What would happen if he didn’t? Could the horses reorganize themselves before the bird returned?

Fireweed cleared Thistle—as he charged past her on the outside, she ducked away from him, drawing the group into a tighter bunch—and set his sights on Talus. The filly wished she could slow down even more, but doing so would only add to the confusion. Fireweed was on his own now. For several strides, he couldn’t gain on her. It appeared he had expended his energy and galloped forward on will alone. Will, Talus knew, doesn’t matter once a horse enters the final stages of exhaustion. There is always a limit. An end to what can be achieved.

The stallion groaned. He groaned as if something deep within him had come undone. Talus recalled the death cry of the old tree felled by the gale: a woody keening followed by a thunderous collapse. Yet Fireweed didn’t drop to the earth in surrender. He quickened. Talus watched, her heart warm with admiration, as the red dun rushed toward, past, and ahead of her. His long tail, a rust stain turned to silk, brushed her nose for a moment. A second later, he
swerved and dashed uphill, nudging Hopsage into position when he sailed by her. Talus heard
him resume his place at the rear of the band. He had succeeded! He had completed an entire
circuit of his mares, his drive forcing them together again. She pricked her ears and whinnied.

United once more, the mustangs covered the last quarter mile with relative ease. They
plunged into the juniper belt, pulled up, and looked at Fireweed. The stallion trembled as if he
had caught a cold. As Talus watched his sweat-darkened coat ripple with exhaustion, shame
bloomed in the pit of her stomach. If she hadn’t lost her focus, Fireweed would still be full of
energy. Now they would have to wait for him to recover.

“Fireweed, are you okay?” Draba asked, touching his frothy neck with her muzzle. She
appeared surprised that she wasn’t the most tired horse in the band.

The red dun said, between gasps, “I’m fine as long as all of you are. Starwort, is your
right front hoof sound? I thought I saw you favoring it.”

“Yes. I nicked it on a stone, but it’s not sore anymore,” the colt replied.

Talus and Thistle glanced at each other. Athletic themselves, they recognized the
enormity of Fireweed’s achievement—and fatigue. That knowledge made his concern for his
bandmates especially poignant. Talus’s shame deepened.

“Maybe you should take over,” the grulla whispered to the blue roan. “I almost ruined
everything.”

Thistle snorted. “Talus, even Aster acted like a fool from time to time. She was still the
best lead mare I’ve ever followed. Besides, you’ve gotten us this far. I couldn’t have done that.
So, what’s our next move?”

The young mustang studied her companion. Her face blackened by the shade of a large
juniper, her muscles a series of knolls and swales beneath her white-ticked hide, Thistle looked
as imposing as a wild horse could. Yet she had placed her faith in a two-year-old filly. A two-year-old filly with a questionable past and an uncertain future. The situation was ludicrous. It would also have to do.

“Give me a moment to think,” Talus said, her confidence restored by necessity more than belief in her abilities.

The grulla turned away from the blue roan and inspected the juniper belt. Aster had taught her the complexities of this habitat as well. The trees retained their needle-like leaves in the fall. As a result, the ground beneath them stayed bare except for fallen cones and old growth. No rustling would precede the mustangs as they headed west toward the river. But the relative openness of the landscape meant large animals would be visible from a distance.

Talus dilated her nostrils. The junipers in the middle of the belt smelled more substantial—their spice weighed down the air around them—than the ones at the edge. She walked forward to investigate. The trees farther in were larger and leafier, perhaps because their kin to the outside took the brunt of the wind. If the horses hugged those full, dense boughs, they might make it to the river undetected.

“Come with me,” the grulla said. “And keep to the center of the belt. We’ll be harder to spot if the bird returns.”

Talus broke into a trot. Her stride had lost much of its tension and precision, a sign of exhaustion, but she had not yet reached the end of her strength. Neither had her bandmates, though Hopsage, Starwort, Draba, and now Fireweed sounded worse off than she had hoped they would be at this point in the journey. The bays no longer moved with the characteristic lightness of their kind; their hooves, heavy and inarticulate, spanked the ground as they jogged after Talus. Draba’s breath whistled in her throat. The soft, silver-edged noise would have reminded the
grulla of a sparrow’s call if it didn’t arouse such dread in her heart. Fireweed trailed the group, coughing and pausing occasionally. He would be better in a few minutes, but the descent from the aspens had blunted his speed.

“Thistle,” Talus said, “I don’t think the others can go any faster than this for at least a mile. Do you agree?”

The blue roan confirmed the young mustang’s instincts. “Yes. Save them for the last push. Unless…you don’t hear the bird, do you? Your ears are sharper than mine.”

“No. It must have found a different band. It could fly back here soon, though.”

“What if the humans have an entire flock of birds? They had more than one before, remember?”

Talus remembered and her coat released the sour odor of fear. She struggled to control herself. If she was frightened, her companions would be, too. “We can’t worry about that. It doesn’t change our plans.”

The filly pressed on, willing herself not to imagine a starling-like mass of silver birds in the sky above Mount Mesteño. All around her, the juniper belt hummed with a beauty so great it reddened her blood and zinged through her bones. The unseasonably warm morning had matured into an unseasonably warm day. Jays issued brazen challenges from perches atop small trees, their plumage a splash of water in an otherwise green landscape. The odd coyote darted across the horses’ path, its copper legs stiff yet kinetic as pistons. Talus wished she and her bandmates could trot along with the sun on their coats and the gamey smell of life in their noses for all time. Then they would be free forever. In perpetual movement, but free.

As the grulla proceeded, she noticed a hitch in the gait of one of her companions. She rotated her ears, trying to identify the injured mustang without looking over her withers. It was
Starwort. His right front hoof struck the ground with less force than usual, the hallmark of a deep bruise. Talus realized the colt had lied when Fireweed asked him if he had hurt himself. Why? Didn’t he know that the health of every family member mattered desperately now? That if a single horse lagged behind, the entire group could be captured?

A memory pushed its way to the forefront of the young leader’s mind. Starwort stood next to Hopsage in the snow-dusted lower elevations, demanding milk again and again though his dam rebuffed him. Aster had laughed at his efforts to prolong his suckling phase but expressed admiration for his persistence. The same persistence, Talus recognized, had made Starwort hide his pain. Delicate like Woodrush, the bay yearling was determined to prove his worth, to perform every physical feat required of him, even if he had to lame himself to do it. Love kicked the filly in the chest. Starwort’s refusal to hinder the band’s progress rivaled Fireweed’s circling of the mares for courage. It was simply a more subdued act of valor.

Talus yearned to stop and give the colt a chance to rest his sore foot. Yet if she did, the silver bird would gain on them. She pinned her ears as if the gesture alone could bolster her resolve. A moment later, a light wind stirred. The spillsong of the river rode the breeze into the junipers. Talus propped, ascertaining the position of the body of water based on the volume of its gurgling music.

“Head southwest at a canter,” she called to the other horses.

The grulla loped out of the belt and set a course for the river. She listened to her friends lengthen stride behind her. They seemed stronger than before. Thistle’s advice to hold them to a trot until they left the trees had paid off. Talus increased her pace slightly. The sooner she got her family across the next obstacle, the sooner she could begin the race to the pass. To the mahogany thicket crouched just below it, a wind-warped, fragrant sanctuary...She could almost feel the
shade on her haunches, could almost see the dense, oval-leaved boughs above her, could almost hear her frenzied breath growing calm in her inflamed throat. They would be okay. She was certain they would be okay.

“No!” Thistle cried, bringing Talus’s fantasy to an end. “We’ll never ford that!”

Rain from earlier in the season had deepened and infuriated the river. The current rushed past the stunned mustangs with twice the rage it had displayed two summers ago. Talus’s energy fled. For a second, she thought she would drop to her knees on the muddy bank. All was lost. When the silver bird came for the horses, they would be far from the thicket, helpless.
“Well,” Thistle said to Talus after the horses had stared at the vicious water for several minutes, “you did your very best. I don’t think anyone could have done better. Let’s return to the junipers. Maybe, if we stay in the center of the belt like you said—”

“The trees were only temporary cover. It’s over, Thistle. It’s over,” Talus snapped, though the situation, not the blue roan, had angered her.

“Any cover’s better than none. Besides, we can’t linger in the open. The flighty mustangs will panic. I’ll panic.”

Talus looked at her bandmates. Hopsage and Draba lashed their tails as they peered at the current. Behind them, Starwort turned his bad hoof on its toe to relieve it of his weight. Meanwhile Fireweed tossed his clay-colored forelock and pawed the sodden floodplain. Their anxiety was indeed too advanced for her to do nothing. Yet no solution to the problem presented itself to her. Even Aster wouldn’t know how to react under the circumstances, and she possessed more intelligence than any horse Talus had ever met, with the possible exception of Draba.

Draba! The grulla’s attempts to pinpoint her companions’ strengths and weaknesses had taught her that the dunalino was an especially perceptive mustang. Perhaps she could figure out a way across the river or at least detect something Talus had missed, something useful to the band.

“Come here, Draba,” the filly said. “I need your help.”

Draba glanced behind her as if to verify that Talus wasn’t talking to another horse with the same name. “My help? How can I help?” she asked, joining her sister on the bank.

“Just tell me what you notice.”
Draba studied the current, her ears pricked and her nostrils flared. For a few seconds, only the muscles in her face moved. They trembled under her thin, velvety skin like butterflies about to fly. Then she stalked up and down the river’s slick lip, her small body charged with concentration. With the tension that accompanies intense mental activity. At last she returned to Talus’s side, her eyes lit by the knowledge she had gathered.

“The water is darkest at its deepest, swiftest points,” Draba said. “If we avoid those areas, we may be able to swim across without being pulled under the surface.”

“Show me,” Talus said.

The dunalino led the grulla to a portion of the river where the current lightened from blue to green. It did indeed appear less treacherous—though still much more deadly than the mustangs had expected. Talus dipped a hoof in and watched as white spray encircled her fetlock. She withdrew.

“Well, it could be shallow and slow enough, but we won’t know until we try,” the young leader said.

“Let me go first. I’m the weakest of the group. If I can make it to the opposite shore, the others can, too,” Draba said. When Talus didn’t reply, she added, “Come on. You know it’s our best option.”

“But you’re my sister.”

“And Fireweed’s your mate and Thistle’s your friend and Starwort’s the last son of Bistort. We’re all important, so I might as well take the risk.”

Talus gazed at Draba. The dunalino had flattened her ears and lifted her tail—a defiant posture. How could this be the filly who had questioned her value to the band mere moments ago? The grulla wondered if she would ever understand the strange mix of anxiety, practicality,
selflessness, and wisdom that carried her sibling through life. She doubted it. Yet perhaps comprehension was not as important as trust.

“Everyone,” Talus said, wheeling to address her whole family, “Draba has found a lull in the current. She’s going to test it out for us. If she drowns, run back to the junipers immediately. If she survives, follow me into the water.”

The horses cranked up their heads and stamped their feet. Starwort in particular greeted the plan with disgust. He stepped toward Talus, his neck arched in a display of rage. Fireweed moved between the colt and filly.

“Don’t start trouble,” he warned the yearling before turning to Talus. “There must be a better way.”

Draba flanked her sister. “There isn’t,” she said, her voice so fierce and certain that Fireweed surrendered without further protest.

The dunalino nuzzled the grulla, vacillated on the bank for a moment, and jumped into the river. She gasped as the current received her, first splattering against her frame and then braiding a new path around it. Talus hoped her sister had cried out at the lung-scorching cold, not the force of the undertow. Her heart filled her chest. Draba looked tiny compared to the mass of water—a cool boil—around her. She could have been a foal once more. The foal with whom Talus had exchanged breath only hours after her birth...If the flaxen-maned filly lost her wet, murky battle, that was it. Nothing would ever matter again.

She didn’t lose. She advanced doggedly, her nose above the surface, her ears pinned, her silky tail billowing like some bizarre but beautiful aquatic plant. Several long minutes after she plunged into the river, she pulled herself onto the far shore and faced her bandmates.
“You can touch the bottom if you stand on the ends of your hooves,” she called. “Do that and you’ll be able to brace yourself against the current.”

Talus leaped into the water. She, too, gasped at the temperature change. It tightened, knotted, and numbed the tendons in her legs, making it hard to tell when her feet brushed the riverbed. Finally she felt the clammy pressure of mud beneath her flailing limbs. The grulla let herself sink until she gained traction. Steadied by the ooze, she half-swam, half-pranced to dry ground. Tugging her body out of the current was more difficult than resisting it; the moist bank crumbled under her weight. Agility alone saved her from a tumble that could have thrown her into a perilous slipstream.

Talus rounded on her family members. They entered the water in their usual order. Thistle led, snorting to clear her nasal passages, the bays drafted off her, and Fireweed acted as rearguard. They looked so alive—and therefore vulnerable—compared to the mindless violence of the river that Talus gasped for breath as if she were still fighting the current herself. Starwort above all seemed at the mercy of a force to which his well-being had no value, to which his well-being was not even comprehensible. His head barely broke the surface; he resembled an otter streaking along beneath the rippled skin of a stream. Yet, when the horses reached the bank, he and his mother leaped out with relative ease. The two biggest mustangs encountered more difficulty. Thistle almost fell backward when a patch of moist earth collapsed under her hooves. Only her quick reflexes carried her to safety. Fireweed, who outweighed the blue roan, knew better than to exit at the same spot. He swam in place until he found a swathe of dirt solid enough to support him.

The bandmates rested for a moment, their barrels rounding and deflating as they drew oxygen into their seared lungs. When Talus recovered, she turned to Draba in gratitude. But
before she could thank the dunalino, a distant sound arrested the horses’ attention. Six pairs of ears pricked, then swiveled to the east. For a few seconds, the noise remained unidentifiable. A tingle in the air that suggested rather than announced movement. Talus extended her senses once again.

Her mental web caught the mysterious sound in its glistening threads. The grulla recognized what struggled there, threshing its wings in a desperate bid to escape: the buzz of a silver bird on the prowl. She trembled from her muzzle to her rump. Hopsage noticed and stiffened. Starwort adopted his dam’s body language instantly.

“It’s the bird, isn’t it?” the bay mare asked, tossing her head to relieve tension. As she did, her wet mane slapped first the right and then the left side of her neck. Talus’s skull throbbed with anger.

“Yes,” the young mustang said, “but keep your voice down. I don’t want anyone to panic.”

“We all saw you shiver, Talus,” Thistle said. The blue roan spoke between pulls of air. If she was exhausted, Hopsage, Starwort, and Draba were probably in need of a long rest. Talus wished she could give them one.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the bay. “My nerves…”

Fireweed joined the conversation. His coat smelled like rain-beaten dirt and his legs shuddered with every step. “What next? Do we have time to catch our breath? I could use a few minutes to recuperate,” he said.

The filly touched the red dun’s cheek with her nose. “I could, too. But we have to press on. We don’t stand a chance unless we make it to the cirque before the bird reaches the west side of the mountain.”
Talus gazed north. She couldn’t see the summit from her vantage point. She knew it was still present, slouched in the wind and starting to collect snow. Somewhere in its jagged crown lay the pass through which her band would hurtle into the mahogany thicket—if she had the courage and skill to get her companions to the upper elevations. It all depended on her now.

Thistle’s advice, Hopsage’s kindness, Fireweed’s valor, Starwort’s determination, and Draba’s powers of observation had delivered the mustangs to the river. Each horse had played its role, as Aster had predicted many months earlier. Talus alone had more to offer. More to sacrifice.

“This is the final push,” she said to her family. “The final barrier between us and freedom. Remember that when you think you can’t run another mile. You can and you must.”

Talus heaved her tired body into a gallop. Her bandmates copied her. Far away—but not far enough—the silver bird trimmed its wings and sailed west.
As Talus charged uphill, she tuned her ears to the mountain. The first leg of the journey to the pass was barren—only the wind could be heard in the immediate vicinity. The second leg contained the aspens the horses had huddled under during the storm; the grulla could just detect the snap and spring of bare branches in a swift breeze. Near those trees loomed the cirque, silent yet emitting a vibration so pronounced it was almost audible. Almost the voice of Mount Mesteño itself. Once the mustangs skirted the pile of scree at the base of their former home, they would begin the third and last leg of the race for their wildness: the climb to the Other Side.

The filly next honed in on her bandmates. Thistle breathed heavily but evenly. Like Talus, the blue roan had not yet entered an advanced state of exhaustion, though she would have welcomed a rest under normal circumstances. Hopsage and Starwort, running in tandem, showed signs of a deeper weariness. Their hooves connected with the gravely soil with a lack of precision born of fatigue, not carelessness. The colt, however, put more weight on his bad foot than before. Perhaps the cold river had drawn a little pain from the bruise. Draba’s wheezing had intensified. A sparrow might have nested in her lungs and started to whistle its way through its repertoire. Fireweed pounded along at the rear, no longer in distress but no longer fleet either. Talus adjusted her pace, slowing down until her tired family members’ discomfort lessened. She had to keep them moving at a rate both fast and sustainable.

The monotony of the treeless zone unnerved the grulla. Usually horses prefer open landscapes since speed is their best defense. Yet aerial attacks render all the quickness in the world irrelevant. Talus expected the silver bird to dive at her any second though her ears told her it was still far to the east. She could tell her companions shared her sentiments without glancing
over her withers. Whenever a turkey vulture described a circle in the air above the mustangs, Hopsage, Starwort, or Draba spooked as if the creature had transformed into a vision of horror, its feathers hardening and flashing in the sun.

Finally Talus spied an aspen grove in the distance: the one in which Vetch—or some other unfortunate horse—had succumbed to the cruelties of winter. The bandmates could pause there for a few minutes, then go on to the thicket where they had weathered the storm. Talus accelerated, pebbles skittering out from under her hooves and bouncing along the incline with an inappropriately cheerful series of pings. She had never been so eager to return to a site of tragedy.

“Come on,” the filly called to her friends, “we can rest in the trees up ahead.”

The mustangs responded, wringing a burst of energy from their anguished bodies. They entered the grove and eased to a walk. As Talus observed the area, exhaustion misted her eyes. Even the closest aspens blurred and receded when she stared at them. She took several woozy steps. Leading the group—a responsibility that required her to gallop at a more draining clip than the rest of the horses—was sapping her strength.

“Are you okay?” Thistle said.

“No,” Talus said. “None of us are, though. Look at our bandmates. Draba’s already covered in lather.”

“Draba doesn’t have to think for the family and scale the mountain.”

“Thistle, I’m tired, but I’m not finished yet.”

The grulla left the blue roan to check on the weaker mustangs. As she inspected Draba, prodding her sister’s tendons with her nose in search of the heat that accompanies a severe strain, she heard Thistle initiate a conversation with Fireweed.
“I’m worried about Talus,” the mare whispered. “We asked too much of her. She’s only a two-year-old, after all.”

The red dun said, “What should we do? Should you guide us to the cirque to let her recover? You can find the way from here, can’t you?”

“Probably. She’d still have to get us to the pass, though.”

“Two quick changes in rank could disorient the others, especially Draba. That filly can’t breathe, much less reason.”

Talus studied Draba. The dunalino did indeed appear to be operating on instinct alone. It was as though her mind had recoiled from the whistling in her lungs, weight of her legs, and general fatigue, leaving her most primitive self in control. The self that would fall apart at the slightest provocation. Talus realized how lucky she and her bandmates had been to make it to the river before Draba’s physical weakness diminished her mental acuity. In fact, luck had run with the horses for most of the day. If they had gone to the southern portion of their range that morning, they would have had to cover many more miles to reach the pass. They probably wouldn’t have attempted the journey in the first place. And the bird would have already caught, separated, and culled them, tearing mare from stallion, mother from son, sister from sister, friend from friend…

The grulla returned to Thistle, who was still speaking to Fireweed in an urgent whisper. “He’s right,” she said to the blue roan. “I could use a break, but we’d better not make any changes at this point.”

The big mare’s ears twitched—a nervous habit. She didn’t know Talus had overheard her. “It’s not that I doubt you. You’re just so young and small compared to me,” she said.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you doubted me.”
“Well,” Fireweed said, “I trust you. How much longer can we afford to stay here?”

The grulla unfurled her senses again. They measured the distance between the silver bird and the grove, the grove and the thicket, the thicket and the cirque, and the cirque and the pass. The humans (she pictured them crouched inside a gleaming ribcage more horrible for its bloodlessness) were flying up the mountain at an alarming rate. Yet the horses still had too many miles to cover without another few minutes of rest.

“A little while. I’ll tell you when to herd the mares out of the trees,” Talus said with as much confidence as she could muster.

The filly stepped away from her mate and walked to the western edge of the grove, where she could listen to the sounds of Mount Mesteño in peace. As she stood there by herself, she tracked the bird’s progress with one ear and explored her surroundings with the other. In the branches above her, a robin released a tinny scramble of notes. Talus wondered what had attracted it to the aspens. The bare trees could offer it neither food nor shelter. At least, in the juniper belt, it could pick at the berry-cones beginning to drop to the earth with a soft plink. But animals didn’t always act in their best interests. Vetch, if the remains disintegrating somewhere nearby belonged to her, hadn’t considered her health when she limped into the upper elevations to die. Talus certainly didn’t think through her behavior as a foal.

As the grulla remembered her fillyhood, she found it hard to believe she had ever been a newborn. Had ever been unafraid of the world and, more importantly, of herself. How could she look small and young to Thistle? Surely she had absorbed enough sorrow over the course of her life to bloat her body and leave it turning, enormous and grotesque, in the tide of existence. Yet her age was irrelevant now. The blue roan could go ahead and gaze at her with the special tenderness the full-grown reserve for their juniors. That wouldn’t change anything. The band’s
safety would hinge on Talus all the same. This burden didn’t bring her joy and pride. She simply knew it was hers. Hers and hers alone. No lead mare—no true lead mare—desired responsibility. Sought responsibility. She could only claim it once circumstances thrust it upon her.

Talus stretched her legs experimentally. They felt cumbersome, more like the limbs of an elk than a mustang. But they were sound. They would carry her to the top of the mountain if she rationed her strength. She examined her companions to see if they, too, had regained their will to continue. Thistle and Fireweed waited for their orders side by side, their ears pricked, their heads raised, their expressions alert. The two bays rubbed their flanks together for warmth; their sweat had seeped through their coats, dried on their skin, and given them an awful chill. Draba, still unminded by fatigue, trembled, her hide shivering and sliding across her muscles. She was the only one whose condition had not improved.

“Fireweed,” Talus said, “come here.”

The red dun trotted over. “Is it time?”

“Yes. Except Draba’s not ready yet. You’ll have to bully her to get her to the thicket. If she falls behind the rest of us, stick with her and we’ll meet you near the pit where Aster died.”

“Okay. I’ll assemble the mares.”

Fireweed gathered his family into a bunch and pointed his ears at Talus to tell her he was prepared to move out. The filly cantered to the northern end of the grove, glanced back at the horses she loved more than her own rapidly beating heart, and exploded from the trees. Her bandmates shadowed her. Behind and below the fleeing mustangs, the silver bird treaderd air, searching for its prey.
CHAPTER 58

Halfway to the thicket, her lungs charred by her own breath, her legs dead things, Talus heard the silver bird draw within a mile of her family. The horses’ coats contrasted with the pale gray gravel beneath their hooves. If they didn’t reach the trees before the humans flew close enough to see them...The grulla couldn’t even bring herself to imagine how visible—and vulnerable—they would be. She simply sped up, ignoring the fiery protests of her body. Thistle, Hopsage, and Starwort accelerated as well. Draba attempted to match strides with her bandmates and failed. But Fireweed remembered his instructions. He bit the dunalino’s hindquarters until pain reenergized her. Each clack of his teeth, audible over the crunch of hooves on rocky soil, hurt Talus. Yet the alternative was worse. Some lead mares and stallions leave the weakest members of their groups to fend for themselves during times of danger.

The young mustang entered the final mile of the run to the thicket in the throes of a strange sensation. She felt both bound to and disconnected from her physical form. Every hair, bone, and organ throbbed with the effort she had expended. The effort she had expended, and the effort she had reserved for the desperate gallop to the pass. Her sweat itself tingled on her hide. But, beyond that, she experienced very little. Not a single specific pang, ache, or strain tormented her. It was as if she had grown indifferent to her body and her body had grown indifferent to her.

Her emotions, however, remained active. Too active. When, a hundred horse lengths from the thicket, Draba’s agony-induced burst of speed petered out, Talus moaned. She knew exactly what would happen next. As the dunalino lost contact with the band, Fireweed reverted to his back-up plan. He stayed with her, slowing to a canter while she floundered. Unable to check without jeopardizing the entire family, Talus pressed on at a rapid pace. Thistle, Hopsage,
and Starwort did the same. The four sailed into the thicket together. At that second, the bird appeared. Fireweed and Draba, still in the open, attracted its eyeless stare. By the time the pair joined their companions, the humans had set a course for the trees.

“What now?” Thistle said, standing at Talus’s side in the cramped refuge. “The bird will be here soon. Directly over us. We’ll go mad with fright.”

“No, we’ll keep calm and outwait the humans. They can’t herd us downhill to the pens if we don’t break from cover,” Talus said with a stamp of her hoof and a lash of her tail. Her confidence was an act. She knew few mustangs could maintain their composure with the whir of a silver bird in their ears.

Thistle sensed Talus’s disingenuousness. She said in a thick voice, “They’ve won, haven’t they?”

The grulla fell silent. She couldn’t bear to confirm her bandmate’s suspicions. It was hard enough just to see the grief on her friends’ faces as the hopelessness of their situation impressed itself upon them. Each horse registered its doom in a unique fashion. Hopsage and Starwort glanced at each other, then looked away, simultaneously fascinated and repulsed by their shared horror. Draba, self-aware again thanks to Fireweed’s teeth, let her head drop between her knees. The red dun studied his mates one by one, his gaze lingering on their pregnant bellies. Talus wondered if he dreamed about his unborn foals as often as his mares did. She had never asked. Somehow that made the imminent capture of her family much, much worse.

The filly almost collapsed—a repetition of her despair on the banks of the swollen river. Before she capsized, a large, lathery shoulder braced her. Thistle had stopped her from falling. The gesture reminded Talus of Spurge, of how the black mustang had steadied her when her rickety legs threatened to pitch her to the ground, of how she had leaned into that solid, equine
shadow whenever she wanted to feel safe. In spite of all her flaws, the grulla had lived up to the
name her mother had bestowed on her with such high expectations not quite three years earlier.
At last she thought of herself as a stone in a slope, as a group member first and a leader second.
It didn’t matter. She had lost.

The bird reached the aspen thicket, descended until its talons almost touched the leafless
crowns of the trees, and hovered there with its wings revolving. Talus peered through the
branches at the creature’s gleaming underside. The plumage on its breast whitened and flashed in
the sun, making the grulla’s eyes smart even more than they did when she stared at freshly fallen
snow for too long. She redirected her attention to the ground. A fluorescent pink afterimage
mottled the soil beneath her hooves for several disorienting seconds. But the sight of the monster
was harmless compared to the sound it emitted: a drone as high as the whine of insects on a hot
afternoon and as low as the groan of a slope about to cave under the weight of rain. It enraged
Talus. She bobbed her head, stamped her forefeet, and switched her tail. Her bandmates also
reacted. Thistle and Fireweed paced as much as possible in the little space, weaving through each
aisle of tightly bunched aspens. Hopsage, Starwort, and Draba shook with the desire to run. To
obey their oldest and strongest instinct. That, of course, was what the humans expected.

“Don’t flee. The bird will herd us downhill the moment we break from cover,” Talus said
in a measured voice intended to set her companions at ease. Her tone had no effect. She, too,
yearned to gallop and everyone knew it.

The mustangs’ agitation increased every minute. As Talus watched her bandmates
suffer—as she herself suffered—the most terrible anger she had ever experienced radiated from
her heart to the rest of her body. Her eyes rolled, her nostrils flared, her throat closed, and her
barrel heaved. For the first time in her life, she wanted to kill. If a human, any human, even
Double Sight, had appeared in the thicket, she would have grabbed it by its bald withers and
dragged it to death. And she would have enjoyed her task. After all, the two-leggeds had
darkened her existence since her foalhood. Even before Penstemon’s breakdown and Bitterroot’s
culling, they had lurked in the blackest corners of Mount Mesteño, ready to seize her in their
weird, abridged jaws. They were the shadows of trees at sunset. They were the screams of little
things struck dead in the night. They were deep purple thunderclouds crouched like predators on
the horizon.

“Talus, you reek of hatred,” Thistle said, pausing in the middle of a pacing session to
inspect the grulla.

“So what?” the filly asked. She couldn’t believe the blue roan had the nerve to pass
judgment on her emotional state while a silver bird churned the air overhead. “You’re not exactly
calm yourself.”

“I’m not lead mare. You are. And if you lose control, we all will.”

The young horse recognized the truth of her bandmate’s words. Even if capture was
inevitable, she and her friends might as well make it as hard as possible for the humans to strip
them of their freedom. Remaining calm gave them a better chance of accomplishing that. Talus
forced herself to breathe slowly and easily. Her pulse decreased in response. Yet fury continued
to waft from her coat. It smelled like burnt grass and it exacerbated her companions’ anxiety.

In the end, Aster soothed her. Aster, whose bones still lay in the pit just beyond the aspen
thicket. The grulla recalled her most mysterious lesson, the visit to Double Sight’s den. Her
mentor had approached the two-legged without fear because it was one of the rare members of its
species who loved what mustangs loved: gray-green sprays of sagebrush, fragrant juniper
boughs, wind-mussed alpine meadows, the tremulous music of leaves in an autumn breeze…It
wouldn’t harm another organism. It couldn’t harm another organism. Something in its nature prevented it from doing so. Something that gave Talus hope for its kind, and, by extension, hers.

The filly’s rage faded. She didn’t despise humans as a rule. She didn’t even despise the ones menacing her now. In fact, she pitied them. Vetch had taught her that cruelty stems from disappointment. When Talus’s anger vanished completely—it dissipated bit by bit, like the veil of rain that succeeds a downpour—the thicket came into focus. The grulla rotated her ears, taking in, not only the silver bird’s wingbeats, but also the natural sounds they hadn’t quite overpowered. Many miles to the south, pronghorns bounded through the scrub. Their notched hooves touched the ground with the delicacy that often accompanies great speed. North of the aspens, in the field where the mustangs grazed during the year they spent in the upper elevations, a bull elk bugled his rights to the land. Talus didn’t know why her senses had extended once more. What good could they do now that escape was impossible? She let them remain in a heightened state anyway. At least then she would experience her final moments as a wild horse with all the open-eyed, open-nostriled clarity she could summon.

While she stood there certain that each thud of her heart would be the last one completed in freedom, Talus’s ears pierced the shining breast of the silver bird and detected a human voice. The voice had the same high-pitched but grunting quality the filly first heard at Willow Creek, when Finch’s master spoke. Yet it also crackled at the edges. To her shock, she grasped the significance of the extra noise. Just as Double Sight used a second pair of eyes to see distant objects, the two-leggeds suspended in the air above her used a second mouth to communicate with faraway bandmates. They had requested reinforcements. Talus wasn’t sure why she knew this. Perhaps her unexpected empathy for her tormentors had allowed her to guess their thoughts. The reason didn’t matter. Her response to the situation did.
“Everyone,” Talus cried, “the humans have sent for another bird. If we’re going to make a run for the pass, we should do it while we only have one monster to shake off.”

“I’m too tired,” Hopsage said. “So is Starwort. We’d rather stay here.”

Draba added, “I don’t think I can press on either.”

Thistle snorted in disgust. “Are you mustangs or not? If your lead mare gives you an order, you follow it and follow it with courage.”

“Hush. Discord is as bad as weakness,” Fireweed said to the blue roan. He next addressed the group as a whole. “We have to leave the trees sooner or later. Let’s do it on our own terms, instead of waiting for somebody to bolt. I’m with Talus. Are you?”

The red dun’s opinion settled the conflict. Hopsage, Starwort, and Draba acquiesced to the grulla’s plan. Talus held her mate’s gaze for an instant. She hoped her eyes conveyed what she didn’t have time to say. Thank you, love of my foalhood, fillyhood, and marehood. I wanted to gallop at the head of your band the second we met. I’m glad that dream has come to pass. It may end in a moment. But I’ll always remember the days we spent together and imagine the years we should have had.

Talus trotted to the northern edge of the aspens and looked up at the summit of Mount Mesteño. She might not reach the top. She had to try. The young horse pinned her ears, gathered herself, and jumped out of the trees. Two rocky, wind-scoured miles separated her from the Other Side.
The bird didn’t follow the mustangs right away. It simply hovered above the aspens, its wings dicing the air. Talus suspected the humans inside it hadn’t expected her to charge into the open without warning. She figured she might as well take advantage of their surprise and accelerated. Her wretched body carried her past the pit—she fancied Aster’s wet treetop smell still lingered there—and toward the cirque. As pain shot through her legs, her exhaustion penetrating muscle, bone, and marrow, an odd tenderness filled her. A tenderness for her own physical form. So often she had taken it for granted. So often it had done what she asked anyway. *Get me to the summit, she told it, and I will never push you this hard again.*

Talus neared the base of the cirque with her bandmates close behind her. The slope that used to give them access to their home lay in a pile of scree ten horse lengths above them. It had looked just as wrecked on the morning after the thunderstorm. The grulla veered east to avoid the rubble. One by one her companions mimicked her, each mustang responding to the movements of its neighbor like a swallow in the middle of a vast flock. Even in her anguish, Talus relished the harmony between her family members. Together they formed a single animal. An animal with six brains abuzz with information, six hearts gorged with blood, and six tails flung out with effort. If only Aster could see them now!

The horses reached the cirque. The humans decided it was time to go after their quarry. Talus heard the bird take off. She lunged forward only to drop to her knees. The soil in the upper elevations—rocky, loose, and dry—made it difficult to run at a fast pace without falling. Frustrated, she regained her feet, then proceeded more slowly. The others also struggled. Thistle peppered Hopsage with shale. Starwort re-bruised his right front hoof and began to limp.
Meanwhile Fireweed had resorted to biting Draba once more; the dunalino squealed whenever his teeth scored her sensitive hide.

Before the grulla cleared the cirque, the bird flew over her, its wake tousling her mane. A moment later, it lowered itself into her path. The whine of its wings clamped her ears to the sides of her head. She wanted to wheel around and gallop in the opposite direction. But if she did, the humans would drive the entire band downhill. Retreat was not an option.

“Hold your ground,” the young mustang called. “Fireweed, don’t let anybody flee. We’re going to fight our way to the pass, one step at a time.”

Talus glanced over her withers at the red dun, ascertained that he knew what to do, and confronted the silver bird. The monster had descended again. It hung in space with its talons a mere foal’s height from the earth. As Talus stared into its terrible face, her gut smarted as if she had consumed a gallon of cold water after a long run. A male human observed her through a convex panel of material similar to clear ice except for its unnaturally smooth texture. The male, or man, to borrow a word from Bitterroot, wore a blank expression. Or at least it seemed blank to the grulla. Two-leggeds, with their stubby features and immobile ears, couldn’t convey emotion with much precision.

The man’s inscrutability frightened Talus more than an open display of ill will. If he had snarled or raised his hackles, she would have known how to act, to meet rage with rage in the immortal struggle between predator and prey. But she couldn’t cope with this. She couldn’t cope with nothing. Her legs trembled so much she had to splay them to stay upright. In another moment, her courage would crumble like an old leaf and she would disobey her own order to maintain position. And who could fault her? What mustang could gaze through the face of a
silver bird into the face of a human for longer than a few breath-shortening, pulse-quickening seconds? Aster, maybe. Aster was dead.

Behind Talus, Hopsage panicked. The bay mare spun around and leaped downhill. Starwort followed, his instinct to stay with his mother overpowering his instinct to stay with the group. Fireweed darted after the runaways, blocked their way, and herded them back into line. The sounds of her mate’s attempts to restore order—the rake of hooves across shale, the clip of dull yet strong teeth, and the swoosh of a tail lashed in protest—told Talus that her bandmates were just as afraid as she was, if not more so. Somehow their skittishness braced her. It seemed their bravery, having deserted them, had sought a new host and found one in the grulla filly. The man lost a little of his horror. Her legs lost a little of their tremulousness.

Talus lunged at the silver bird. She didn’t know what made her do it. No horse had ever rushed one of those whirring, whining monsters. Had ever charged toward such a maelstrom of light, noise, and movement. Later, the filly would wonder if her love for her family and her own wild heart had allowed her to transcend her species. To shed the terror of the unfamiliar that infected all equines. But she would never be sure.

When Talus jumped forward, the bird backpedaled to avoid a collision. She had expected it to weather her blow or even counterattack. Perhaps, like its feathered cousins, it possessed hollow bones that might break upon impact. This gave her an idea. If she continued to hurl herself at her foe and it continued to withdraw, she could approach the pass at a rate too slow to create suspicion. The human simply wanted to impede her progress until his reinforcements arrived and he regained control of the situation. He would focus on that goal at the cost of understanding the real purpose of her aggression: to reach the summit, then gallop over it into the safety of the mahogany trees. At least she hoped that was how everything would turn out.
“Talus, are you crazy?” Thistle cried when she deduced the grulla’s intent.


With that, Talus began the final, heart-searching ascent to the Other Side. She ran at the bird and it retreated—but only enough to protect itself—more times than she could count. More times than she could remember. Her exhaustion had intensified so much that only a few sensations left an impression, a kind of mental fossil record, in the sediment of her mind. The wind generated by her adversary’s bizarre wings struck her with a pressure not unlike the force exerted by a strong current, stinging her eyes and ruffling her coat. Dirt beaten from the gravel by the same wind slithered down the mountain; the brown mist chapped the grulla’s nostrils. Lather formed on her damp neck. Occasionally a gob of it, the color and consistency of creek foam, fell to the ground. It sparkled in the golden afternoon light, a rank yet beautiful testament to her fatigue.

As Talus and the human engaged in their strange, thrust-and-parry contest, a second bird closed on the mustangs. The filly heard it glide over the aspen thicket, the pit, and the pile of scree. Soon it would join its flockmate in the rugged, wild land above the cirque. She couldn’t resist two of the fearsome creatures. Not without a better plan. What would Spurge do? The black mare had defeated Greasewood and Rimrock that day in the basin with footwork, not raw speed or strength. In doing so, she had changed the course of her daughter’s life. Now, she just might save it.

“By the time the second bird catches up to us, we’ll be a quarter mile below the summit,” Talus said to Thistle between lunges. “I’m going to veer hard to the right. If the humans herd mares just like stallions, they’ll chase me in an attempt to turn the band. When that happens,
follow me, but not too closely. Once the two-leggeds set off in the wrong direction, I’ll double left, toward the pass. If we’re quick—and lucky—we’ll make it to the Other Side before they correct themselves.”

“What if we don’t? There’s not much speed left in my legs and the rest are in even worse condition,” the blue roan said, her voice ragged with fatigue.

“We will. Believe we will or we don’t stand a chance.”

Talus fell silent. She had to save her breath for that last quarter mile. As she fought on, gaining ground horse length by horse length, staring past the glare on the bird’s face into the man’s pale eyes, and gasping in pain when the strain of her uphill crusade pulled her ligaments taut, her mind also quieted. Not a single thought galloped through her head. She might have been born into this moment. Born fully formed and without history. The grulla mustang who staggered upright in a windy meadow so long ago, her coat still matted with afterbirth, had never existed. Never loved a black mare, befriended a dunalino filly, betrayed a dun colt, or mated with a clayspun stallion. Never learned humility from a silver buckskin with sorrow in her stout old heart.

The horses entered the shadow of the summit. The second bird arrived. It swooped down and hovered directly behind the red dun, trapping the band between two air-chopping, glittering monsters. Talus’s past returned to her in a torrent of sensory information. The fat-and-sod taste of Spurge’s milk, the clovery scent of Draba’s hide, the ring of Fireweed’s hooves, and Aster’s charcoal waterfall of a mane coalesced into a reminder. A reminder of why she had run so far and so hard. Of why, even now, as exhaustion drove her into the dusky reaches of the Valley where her mentor waited for her, she refused to yield. Refused to let the humans win.
Talus glanced up at the jagged crown of Mount Mesteño. The pass—a slit in a row of stones shaped like an herbivore’s lower jaw—was visible at last. In another jump, she would enact her plan.

“Get ready, Thistle!” the grulla cried.

With the same electric turn of foot Spurge had displayed in the basin, the young mustang charged to the right. The blue roan leaped after her, careful to leave enough room for a rapid change of course. Meanwhile Fireweed nipped Hopsage, Starwort, and Draba into action. He didn’t understand Talus’s stratagem, but he would follow his thundercloud filly anywhere.

Both birds pursued the band. They hurtled over Talus and lowered themselves into her path, expecting her to flee to the south. Instead, she wheeled left. For a split second, she eyeballed the man. This time his emotions were clear. He wore a look of surprise reminiscent of the one on Greasewood’s face when he rounded on Spurge only to find she had darted back the way she had come.

Talus raced toward the summit, her mane fluttering in a dry breeze and her feet skittering on equally dry soil. Above her, the sky whitened as day approached evening. Ahead of her, the pass loomed, the rocks on either side of it mouse gray in the wan light. Behind her, Thistle, Hopsage, Starwort, Draba, and Fireweed surged up the incline, each horse wearier than it had ever been or would be. The grulla rotated an ear; she heard the first bird circle in the right direction and give chase. It overtook the mustangs one by one, its wake rippling their coats. Finally, it cleared Talus.

Even before the creature descended, wings ablur, the filly realized she couldn’t beat it to the Other Side. The urge to abandon her family and save her foal seized her, but only for a moment. She accelerated, reaching the pass at the same instant as the bird. Its talons sliced open
her withers. The human, startled by the impact, jerked his silver servant high into the air.

Cloaked in blood, Talus stumbled forward, her bandmates hard upon her.
Mount Mesteño dimmed and tilted as Talus descended from the pass to the mahogany thicket. The filly sensed that a blackness as dark as her mother’s coat would soon envelop her. That, once it did, she would never see Draba or Fireweed or Thistle again. Would never see anything—except shadows lengthening in Aster’s Valley—again. She had to reach the trees before that happened. If she collapsed, her bandmates might check and give the silver birds a chance to herd them back the way they came. Talus staggered on. She refused to die. Not until her family was safe.

The grulla reeled into the thicket with her companions at her tail. As soon as she pulled up, the blackness closing in on her intensified. She bobbed and swayed like a foal who has just stood for the first time. Why had the light disappeared and taken her balance with it? The nearest mustang, Thistle, appeared as hoary as she did in the gray interlude between evening and nightfall, but the sun hadn’t set. Its liquid rays flooded the tiny gaps in the mahogany canopy. Talus shut her eyes, seeking relief in blindness. Her smell sharpened to compensate. A dense, rusty odor entered her nostrils: the scent of blood. Her own blood, so wet and sticky and alive she thought she had grown a new hide. A hide made of her insides.

“Talus,” Thistle said, “how bad is your wound? Are you in a great deal of pain?”

The young horse flicked her ears, straining to hear her friend’s words. Apparently sound, like light, no longer obeyed the laws of nature. “No. Not really. Does it look deep?” she asked once she understood the question.
The blue roan peered at the grulla’s torn withers. Even with the thicket wheeling, a trapped animal with leaves for fur and branches for claws, Talus spied terror on Thistle’s face. “It’s hard to tell. Some cuts bleed a lot no matter if they’re shallow.”

Hopsage approached, examined the injury, and cried, “It is deep, Thistle! No mustang can survive—”

“Hush,” Fireweed said from a few horse lengths away. “She can’t afford to panic.”

Talus would have laughed if she had enough energy. As her family members talked, the blackness around her had sweetened. It still disoriented her, but she wanted it. Wanted to lean into it as she had leaned into Spurge years ago. Death, it seemed, was only a return. Only a homecoming. A mare the color of rain-buffed granite had given Talus life. Now another, similarly inky creature would stamp her out. Why panic? She of all mustangs knew there was beauty in gloom. Maybe more than in any of the day’s glories. Than in the sheen of a magpie’s feathers and the brown braid of a creek and paintbrush ruddled by a summer sunrise. Than in the unfolding of an infant leaf.

“Fireweed, the birds! The birds are above us!” Starwort said, his voice breaking up like ice in the spring.

The horses raised their heads. They couldn’t see the birds through the mahogany canopy, but it was clear at least one of the monsters had descended in an attempt to flush the band from the trees. The chop of revolving wings reached the mustangs as a brusque and fearful music. In addition, the wake of those wings plucked the odd leaf from its berth. Talus watched a foliage-laden twig snap and pirouette to the earth, its fall as graceful yet haphazard as that of a butterfly. The sight, exaggerated by her exhaustion, hypnotized her. She wondered if the blackness would
engulf her. Would herd her, gently, like a solicitous stallion, into darker climes. She wasn’t upset. Only reflective.

“What now, Talus?” Thistle asked.

The grulla lifted her muzzle, trying to keep her ears, eyes, and nostrils above the murk rising from her legs to her girth, her girth to her throatlatch, her throatlatch to her chin…She could just make out Thistle over the ominous tide. “Stay right here until the humans leave. And they will leave. They can’t force us into the open with so much greenery above us,” she said, her voice more coherent and confident than expected.

“It’s true,” Draba said, her lungs twittering as she spoke. “During the previous round-up, a bird knocked down dead branches with its talons to scare us into dashing from cover. That’s how we were caught in the end. But this thicket’s too dense to claw apart. The humans would lose their balance.”

Talus listened to her sister without emotion. Under normal circumstances, the dunalino’s intelligence in the face of danger would have filled the grulla with tenderness. Now she felt nothing. Not for Draba, Fireweed, or her unborn foal. Not for the mountain itself. It was not that she no longer loved them. In fact, she loved them more than ever. She had simply lost access to the part of herself capable of experiencing affection. Fatigue, it seemed, overpowered all other sensations.

“Talus and Draba are right. We can outwait the humans,” Fireweed said.

“I can’t take another step anyway,” Starwort said, tucking his right foreleg under his belly as if to protect his injured hoof from the world. “Can I rest?”

“No. If you lie on the ground in your condition, you might never rise again. That goes for everyone. No matter what, don’t give in to your tiredness.”
Talus recalled the conversation she had with Aster on the day the silver buckskin led her to the summit of Mount Mesteño. The old mare’s words trickled into the young horse’s mind like a shallow stream, silent, silver, and insistent: “My body could quit on me at any moment…I can sense my energy changing…When I was a foal, I watched a mouse die. He crouched near his hole, motionless yet not at peace. It appeared his life had altered course, was flowing from him instead of through him. The same thing is happening inside me.”

The grulla suspected Fireweed feared a similar reversal of energy. A similar outpouring of life force. She also wondered if her dislocation from her emotions was a symptom of the strange phenomenon. Perhaps all the wants, needs, and impulses that come with existence had left her in a quivering mass. She could almost see it drifting farther and farther away, a spectral cloud made up of the many images and impressions she had collected since her birth. Spurge’s silken nose—big and black and the entire world—in the moments after Talus stood for the first time. The aerial heroics of nighthawks catching insects on a late summer evening. Larkspur and Fireweed locked in a terrible embrace, more intimate than they had ever been with their mares. For a second, the filly longed to pursue the cloud. To take it back inside her body. But it was much too late for that. Much too late.

“Listen!” Hopsage said. “I think the birds are heading south!”

Talus lifted her tired eyes and pricked her tired ears. The mahogany canopy had stilled. Not a single leaf recoiled from a wing-generated wind and fluttered to the soil. Nor was the awful thrumming as loud as before. The grulla relaxed, moving deeper into the blackness as she did so. Her family had survived the round-up. Now Fireweed could herd his mates to the cirque for a rest and a drink from the tarn. Now she, having served her purpose, could die.
“We’ll stay here until we’re sure the humans are gone. And remember what I said earlier—don’t lie down. We can sleep stretched out like foals once we’ve recovered,” the red dun said, his voice both sober and bright with relief.

Talus regretted that she had only run with him for a little over a year. She would have loved to watch him grow as a leader. To watch him grow and to grow alongside him. But he would have his blue roan, his bay, and his dunalino to nuzzle him. Groom him. Bear his offspring. They would keep him happy and he would keep them happy. Comforted, Talus kneeled, rolled onto her side, and set her face on the hard floor of the thicket. The rocky dirt of the upper elevations had never felt so soft, so moss-like...

“Didn’t you hear your stallion? Get up!” Thistle cried, hurrying to the grulla.

“Let her do as she pleases,” Hopsage said in a heartbroken whisper. “She might as well be at ease when she…you know.”

Thistle withdrew. “I suppose you’re right. She deserves a peaceful end. Wasn’t she spectacular, charging the bird like that?”

“Don’t talk about her as if she’s dead!” Fireweed snapped. He scattered the mares with a swing of his head. “Talus, pay attention to me. Be brave and find your feet. If you give in, you’re a goner. You’re doomed.”

The young mustang couldn’t speak. Instead, she lifted her leaden skull, twisted her neck to lick her wounds, and only managed to wet the tip of her tongue. Her blood tasted sweet. As sweet as the decay-ripened carcass of a deer, its flesh soft and slippery enough to drop from the bone at the slightest touch. She shuddered, then lay back down. Above her, the boughs of the mahogany trees swayed even though the alpine wind was relatively mild. Overwhelmed, she closed her eyes. In blindness lurked stillness, in stillness, relief.
“Don’t quit!” Fireweed cried. “You can’t quit, not now that we’re safe!”

Hopsage said gently, “She isn’t quitting. She’s dying. This has nothing to do with willpower. Nothing to do with you.”

“It has everything to do with me!”

Talus heard terror in her mate’s voice. Terror, and rage at his inability to save her. She pitied him. A stallion’s life purpose is to protect his mares. As long as he serves that purpose, he’s whole. Certain of his place in the world. But in its absence…He might as well be a mare without a womb. If only she had the strength to stand, to let Fireweed tend to her, to make him feel useful again.

“Talus,” he said, prodding her with his nose, “you have to get up. Do it for me. Do it for our foal. You want to meet her. To see her romping across Bergamot Meadow with her sisters and brothers. I know you do.”

Talus opened one filmy eye. Fireweed’s face, outlined by the silver late afternoon light, looked as beautiful as ever. Did the face of the little thing inside her have the same breadth, the same combination of boldness and delicacy? Perhaps it was too early to ask such a question. The unborn filly—or colt, for, in spite of the red dun’s assumptions, the baby’s sex could not yet be determined—might need more time to develop features. Talus pictured a vaguely equine creature growing ears and a muzzle, the process as gradual as the millimeter by millimeter extension of a snail’s tentacles. She did want to meet the end result. To love the end result. Maybe her foal could accompany her to the Valley. Maybe she could deliver it there, Aster, Penstemon, Vetch, and Bitterroot’s wild self at her side. How wonderful for an animal to be converted to spirit before it had a chance to suffer!

“Please get up,” Fireweed said, softening his earlier command.
Starwort echoed his surrogate father: “Please, Talus.”

“At least try,” Thistle added. “Surely you can try.”

Talus closed her eyes again. Her bandmates fell silent. She could smell their sadness. It thickened the air like a summer rain. If she could have absorbed their grief and experienced it for them, she would have without hesitation. But she couldn’t. She couldn’t do anything for them anymore, except, perhaps, to die with as much grace as possible.

The ground reverberated and stilled. Someone had reclined beside the grulla. Someone who smelled of sun-baked earth. It was Fireweed, disregarding his own well-being to comfort her in her final moments. She hoped his fatigue wouldn’t keep him down once her death released him. Gratitude outweighed concern. Talus didn’t want to fall away without a warm, living body pressed against her rapidly cooling one. She inhaled the red dun’s scent. Pulled it deep into her lungs so that she and the finest stallion she had ever known would be united until the end. A powerful sense of serenity washed over her. The blackness narrowed, then opened onto the Valley. A full moon illuminated that strange, soundless place. Aster was there, her coat shimmering, her foals behind her, the smallest half-hidden in the shadow of an aspen grove. Was it the deformed colt? Talus peered into the darkness, seeking the answer to the question Spurge had put to her before the round-up. In a second, just another second, her eyes would adjust and she would learn the secret…

“Talus. Talus, stay with us. Stay with me.”

The grulla worked her ears. She recognized the voice calling her back from the Valley even though Mount Mesteño had faded to a whisper, a tinkle of leaves. She recognized it because it belonged to the one horse she had run with all her life: Draba, her sister, confidante, and best friend. Draba, who had witnessed—and suffered from—her past mistakes, but loved her anyway.
“This isn’t your destiny. This isn’t how things are supposed to turn out,” the dunalino continued. “How can I face your mother if you die and I live? How can I face myself?”

In the Valley, her thundercloud hide lightened by the moon, the mystery foal almost in view, Talus hesitated. She glanced over her withers at the mahogany thicket. Her limp form reclined between Fireweed and Draba, the barrel barely expanding with each intake of breath, the legs shaking with exhaustion, the tail twitching of its own accord. For an instant, she longed to wheel around and gallop to her bandmates. To rise from the blackness like a drowning creature who, submerged and sinking, finds the energy to swim to the surface. The instant passed. Aster was near. Too near to be denied.

“Talus, please don’t go,” Draba begged. “I want to grow old with you. I want you to be the one thing in my life that never changes. Seasons come and go. Stallions win and lose mates. Foals mature, then forget their mothers. But you and I, we stay together. We belong together.”

The grulla looked from the mahogany thicket to the Valley. Aster pricked her ears expectantly. So did her colts and fillies. They wanted company. They yearned for it. And Talus would have been happy to join them, to proffer her muzzle and exchange breath with her mentor for the first time since the storm. To claim her place among the dead. Yet the blackness no longer intoxicated her. It was beautiful, but not quite real, not quite essential. The young mustang didn’t know why until two of Aster’s foals began to playfight. Their pink-shelled baby hooves cut the sod without releasing the heavy perfume of wet grass. Talus flared her nostrils and realized the Valley smelled blank. Characterless. Void.

“Come back, Talus. Come back to me,” Draba said, her voice rising in pitch and volume.

Even reduced to a distant call, the dunalino was more substantial than the Valley. More substantial, and more dear. A horrifying possibility presented itself to Talus. If she died at two
and Draba lived to an advanced age, the siblings might not recognize each other once they were reunited in the afterlife. One would be a youthful yet bleary memory, one an elderly mare too swaybacked and round-bellied to identify. They would exchange glances, pause in momentary confusion, and walk on with an inexplicable sorrow in their hearts. Talus couldn’t bear to lose her connection to Draba. It was more than a friendship, more than a sisterhood, more than the most enduring love that can spring up between horses. It was a link to the past. To the joyful period when the grulla measured time by the arrivals and departures of birds, not the coming of the humans. To the balmy summer days that taught her the value of life and sustained her during the dark hours after the culling.

“I’m sorry,” Talus said to Aster. “I choose Draba. I choose the mountain shot through with color in the spring. I choose the scent of the sagebrush scrub at the end of a hot afternoon. I choose the sun.”

The silver buckskin’s creekbottom eyes glowed as brightly as they did by the river, when Fireweed claimed the very yearling she hoped to train. “Then I’ll wait for you,” the old mustang said. “I’ll wait for you right here. Live well. You can run with me later, once you’ve had plenty of adventures to tell me about. And remember this: Today you were—and, now, will always be—everything I dreamed of.”

Talus whirled, cantered across the Valley, and looked back at Aster. The old mare hadn’t moved. She stood with her ears pricked and her head cranked up as high as it could go, so still she might have put down roots, might have moored herself to the earth like some fantastic tree. Her foals, their playfulness spent, also froze, their forever babyish faces growing sober, then somber, then stricken. Talus wanted to assure them she would return sooner than they thought. But would she? It was impossible to say. She didn’t even know if the Valley existed. The
scentless grass suggested otherwise. *Goodbye*, the grulla took mental leave of the silver buckskin and her young, *for a short time or for all time*. The dead seemed to hear her soundless farewell. They parted. For a moment, she saw the colt in the shadows. Saw his silhouette. She couldn’t tell if he was disfigured yet no longer cared. The Valley’s secrets would reveal themselves at a later date.

Talus spun around and galloped toward the mahogany thicket. As she approached her destination, a range of smells flooded her nostrils. The rust-and-salt odor of her wound. The sugary but sharp musk of the canopy. The rain-like grief wafting from her bandmates’ coats. She accelerated, her heart light though she recognized she had chosen a hard path. A recovery almost as agonizing as the race to the summit. As the slash of the bird’s talons. The next second, she reentered her torn, exhausted body. Pain radiated from her withers to every part of her capable of experiencing discomfort. She welcomed the sensation because it meant she was alive. Alive and free in spite of the humans’ best attempts to thwart her. When she opened her eyes and rolled onto her belly, she noticed the sky had brightened with the false morning of sunset. In its glow, her bandmates, the trees beyond her bandmates, and the mountain beyond the trees shimmered, more beautiful than ever before. Talus lurched to her feet.
Once the danger passed, Fireweed drove his mares down the mountain to the cirque, where they could rest before the trek to Bergamot Meadow. The short walk almost destroyed Talus’s recently restored will to live. Agony rippled from her shoulders to her withers with every step. Occasionally, when loose rocks shifted beneath her hooves, forcing her to scramble for purchase, the muscles in her back seized up with such violence she couldn’t breathe. Without her bandmates’ encouragement, she would have succumbed to fatigue on those stony slopes.

The horses spent several weeks in their old range, feeding on brittle autumn grass and drinking from the tarn. Each one had been marked by the race to the mahogany thicket. Thistle didn’t move with the same agility—it seemed she, having learned how hard she could push her body, no longer cared to plumb the depths of her great strength. Hopsage, the most cheerful member of the group, became solemn, often muttering to herself when another mustang expressed hope for the future. Starwort developed a permanent limp, a handicap he accepted with pluck and bore with sadness. Draba wheezed more than ever. Even Fireweed was altered. While still willing to pour reckless amounts of energy into the welfare of his family, he avoided situations that required him to do so.

Talus changed most of all. Her wound closed, but her coat didn’t re-grow over it, leaving a strip of raised flesh visible. The scar would always smart on cool mornings, before the sun rose and warmed the blood in that ridge of skin. The grulla’s personality also suffered. Though not unfriendly or even withdrawn, she spoke less often. Sometimes she said nothing for hours on end. It was as if she had left part of herself in the fragrant shade of the mahogany trees. Left it to drift, un-bodied, through the high places. Only Draba understood what had happened to the
young leader. Talus had galloped too close to the flame of life and it had burned away everything except the qualities she needed to survive.

On a crisp morning, Fireweed raised his head, whiffed the air, and knew that winter approached. He herded his bandmates out of the cirque, then east toward Bergamot Meadow, where the mountain wouldn’t ice over for a few more months. Talus, who had not yet recovered, found the journey as arduous as the run from the silver bird. She stayed at the rear of the group with Draba, periodically halting and standing in place with her eyes shut until she could proceed. The other mustangs were patient—they owed their freedom to the grulla—but eager to return to their beloved range. When they passed the stud pile Fireweed had inspected in the summer, they increased their pace to a brisk trot.

A second later, Thistle propped and said, “Fireweed, I smell a stallion. A big, healthy one.”

The red dun joined the blue roan. He stiffened immediately, his ears swiveling toward a stand of aspens ten horse lengths away. “I see you,” he called. “Come into the open so we can talk.”

A liver chestnut bachelor emerged from the trees. Talus recognized him as a member of Bistort’s gang. Her heart clenched. The smoky black must have been culled. Otherwise he would be with his companion. Did Spurge know? Or had she been taken to a Thicket of Pens along with him, doomed to spend the rest of her days without access to the sights, sounds, and scents of Mount Mesteño?

“I don’t want to fight—just to continue west,” the bachelor said, walking over to Fireweed with a deferential set to his ears.

“Very well. I don’t want to fight, either. The round-up wore me out.”
“But your band is still intact. How did you manage that?”

“I didn’t. My lead mare did.”

Fireweed glanced at Talus. The bachelor studied the grulla and tossed his forelock. “Her? She’s my age.”

“It’s true,” Thistle said. “When a silver bird came for us, she endured a blow from its talons and led us to safety. Talus, show him your injury.”

The filly turned around to display her wound, annoyed at being treated like an object of curiosity yet too weak to complain. A gasp told her the bachelor had viewed the grisly cut. She faced him again and watched as a bizarre expression spread across his features. His ears pricked, his eyes gleamed, and his muzzle quivered. He appeared on the verge of speech. But, unable to form words, he cantered off squealing with a terrible joy. The mustangs looked at each other in bewilderment. They had never encountered such a strange combination of awe and happiness. Talus felt like she had wandered into the ionized aftermath of an electrical storm; every hair tingled.

The bachelor’s reaction didn’t make sense for a few days. One morning, while the mustangs grazed in Bergamot Meadow, the answer to the mystery arrived in the form of a small family from the southern foothills of Mount Mesteño. Winter had not yet crisped the air and whitened the summit, but the horses could hear its footsteps. Soon frost would announce its coming, ice would clear a path for it, and snow would usher in its bitter reign. Talus, still fragile, dreaded the change of seasons. She didn’t know if she could survive the cold days ahead of her, much less carry her foal to the spring. Her bandmates also sensed her vulnerability. Draba and Hopsage cleaned her wound and checked it for infection on a regular basis. Thistle, less disposed to displays of affection, showed her concern by leading the grulla to the best grass and urging her
to gorge herself. The blue roan was engaged in one of these exhortations when the strangers appeared.

“Talus, don’t waste your time on that thin, brown stuff,” she called. “The good eating’s over here, in the middle of the meadow.”

The young mustang glanced at Draba in exasperation. Thistle’s bossiness—the older horse was acting lead mare until the thundercloud filly recovered—irritated the rest of the group in spite of the care that underpinned it. But Talus felt too weary to argue with her willful deputy. She flicked her ears in assent and walked to the center of the sward.

“All right, where’s this good eating?” she asked.

Thistle didn’t reply. Talus followed her gaze south to a little stand of aspens. An elderly dun gazed out from the trees. A near-black yearling and a brown stallion flanked her. All three seemed hesitant, perhaps even intimidated.

“Fireweed,” Thistle said, “you’d better get over here.”

The red dun, who was teaching Starwort how to break a rival’s hold on his withers with a well-timed buck, looked up in alarm. He immediately spotted the newcomers and hastened to place himself between them and his mates. For a moment, both parties remained motionless. Then the old dun advanced.

She was an odd-looking mustang. Age had woven so many gray hairs into her coat that it brightened to a muddy white when she stepped from the aspens into the sun. Her body language also gave pause; she moved at a deliberate pace and pointed her left ear to the side. When she drew closer, the bandmates saw why: one of her eyes glowed green. Smoky green, like a gemstone. Talus, Draba, and Starwort recoiled. They had never encountered moon blindness before and feared the stranger carried some terrible disease. Their seniors simply looked at the
mare with pity. After what seemed an age, she halted in front of Fireweed and waited for him to speak in a polite silence.

At length, the red dun said, “Who are you?”

“Snowberry, from the south,” the red dun replied. “The stallion is Cocklebur, the yearling Purslane. I told them to stay in the trees while I stated our business. Cocklebur has been lame since the round-up and doesn’t want to fight.”

Snowberry introduced herself with such confidence Fireweed and his companions shed their pity like dead hair. Here was a mare who, in learning to survive with half the world obliterated, had developed a powerful but far from arrogant sense of her own worth. Only the ear she kept tuned to the darkness on her left betrayed a fear of unseen threats. Once her initial shock wore off, Talus liked the dun. Thanks to Aster, the grulla would always gravitate toward older females.

“What’s your business, then?” Fireweed asked.

“We’ve come,” Snowberry said, her sighted eye gleaming, “to see the bird-struck filly.”

“The bird-struck filly? Do you mean Talus?”

“If Talus is the one the liver chestnut bachelor told us about. The one with a talon slash across her withers.”

The grulla turned to Draba nervously. She didn’t want news of her injury to spread, not after the bachelor’s fearful, joyful charge across the meadow. It seemed the touch of those silver claws had changed her in some fundamental way. Had made her strange. She remembered Vetch’s progression from loss to solitude, solitude to madness, and madness to death. Perhaps a horse could only experience so much before she became an outcast. An object of terror. The chocolate-colored mare had been warped by her son’s de-wilding, the grulla filly by contact with
a beast. Talus shuddered. Every morning since the round-up, she had woken with the thrum of revolving wings in her ears and the musk of blood in her nose. Worse, when a cold wind skimmed the hairless flesh around her wound, pain spidered through her withers. *My poor body,* she thought, *you’ll never forget that day either.*

Snowberry noticed the young mustang’s discomfort and said, “You. You’re Talus. I can tell by the sorrow in your gaze.”

“What if she is?” Draba said, stepping forward protectively. “If you’re here to gawk at her—”

“You misunderstand me. I don’t wish to view the bird’s mark out of simple curiosity. My desire is deeper and purer than that. I’m old. I’ve watched the humans cull my mates, sons, daughters, and friends more times than I can recall. And, if I’m to die with peace of mind, I need to fix this eye of mine on proof we wild horses can escape the two-leggeds. Can remain free, at least in rare circumstances.”

Talus stared into the elderly dun’s face. Years of suffering had accentuated the grooves on either side of her muzzle, giving her a pinched appearance. Yet she didn’t look bitter. Only disappointed and very, very tired. The filly couldn’t deny Snowberry’s request.

“Fine. I’ll let you examine me,” she said. “But be gentle. My wound is still tender.”

The grulla approached the dun. They exchanged breath and rubbed flanks, reading each other’s scent stories with interest. Snowberry smelled of clay-rich soil; maybe she was born in the barrens under a nighthawk-filled sky. Talus pictured her as a foal with two dark eyes, a scruffy yellow coat, and legs stained red by flying dirt. The image contrasted with the old mare’s current state to the extent that the young mustang bobbed her head in agitation. She didn’t want to reflect on how time would alter her as well, not when she was already vulnerable from her
injury. Snowberry must have sensed Talus’s concerns. She pricked her ears as if to say, “Aging isn’t that bad. You’ll see one day.”

The two horses separated and relaxed. They were sufficiently acquainted now. Talus walked in a slow circle to show Snowberry her withers. When the filly completed her circuit, she stopped and looked up at her observer. At first, the old dun’s expression was inscrutable. Not a single muscle in her face moved. She didn’t blink. She didn’t flare her nostrils. She didn’t adjust the set of her teeth. But, gradually, a light came into her eyes. Both eyes. For a moment, Talus thought sight had returned to the green one. It widened and quivered as though the pupil lying dormant under its cloudy center had stirred. Had woken after a long passage of darkness with the last image it received still ghosting across its surface. Then Snowberry reacted to whatever she had spied in the grulla’s wound.

She didn’t run or squeal like the bachelor. Instead, she trembled, her coat emitting a strange scent. A scent both sharp and sweet. It reminded the young mustang of new growth, of leaves emerging from their predecessors’ berths, equally steeped in life and death. As Talus inhaled the bizarre smell, she recognized its components: the bitter spice that accompanies the detection of a threat and the clovery aroma associated with serenity. The two odors explained the “bird-struck” horse’s unusual effect upon her fellow equines. Talus wasn’t a pariah. She was a reminder. A reminder of the complexity of Mount Mesteño and the world itself.

All animals—perhaps even humans—would suffer at some point before they died. They would lose their sires, dams, siblings, mates, offspring, and, in many cases, themselves. They would be taken from the land, or the land would be taken from them, destroyed by the heavy hooves of cattle. At the end of their days, they would see the journey from birth to old age as a path as meandering yet purposeful as a deer trail. The more pensive individuals would remember
how mysterious existence had seemed when they were young. How they had ached to learn what would happen to them. What place they would fill. Now they knew. No wonder remained. No anticipation. Only a slow slide into nothingness.

But they would also experience happiness of the highest order. They would delight in their own beauty, in their own speed and strength and appetite for living. They would delight in each other, in the certainty that they were not alone, that everyone they met was just as vulnerable. Just as mortal. And, sometimes, they would run for the pleasure of it. For the keening of the wind in their ears, the heat of the sun on their backs, the give of the grass under their feet...Life was difficult. Painful. Often tragic. Yet, in their final seconds, they would want more of the same, and they would want it with a relentless, selfish, unapologetic hunger.

Talus found it strange that her wound—a matter of the flesh—meant so much to the horses of Mount Mesteño. Yet she understood why the injury represented both the horror and wonder of life. She had suffered a terrible blow, a blow no wild thing should ever endure, a blow more sickening than the swipe of a big cat’s claws because it was unnatural. But she had lived. That proved the humans didn’t always win. It was possible to remain free, to die in the fluttering shade of a spring aspen or on a soft bed of bunchgrass. And as long as such a possibility existed, a mustang could face each day with courage.

Snowberry regained her composure and said, “Thank you. I needed to see that. Now I can rest. May my bandmates also look upon you?”

“Yes,” Talus said. “Bring them to me.”

The old dun called over Cocklebur and Purslane. They approached warily, their ears pricked and their heads low to show deference to Fireweed. The two exchanged breath with the grulla, then stared at her withers. Purslane, a colt around Starwort’s age, touched the talon slash
with his nose. Talus’s skin was still inflamed and dotted with blood flakes. She flinched at the contact. Fireweed and Thistle moved forward with aggressive arches in their necks. The young horse warned them off with a stamp of her hoof. There was no reason to intimidate the yearling. He hadn’t intended to hurt her.

When the males had finished examining Talus, they backed away and made awed eye contact. Purslane seemed particularly affected. Perhaps his first round-up had altered his worldview. Had introduced him to the worst kind of sorrow. The kind that closes the throat and rolls through the flanks. Perhaps this sorrow had been tempered by his interaction with the grulla. Tempered, or even eradicated by the knowledge that the mountain offered more than tragedy, more than heartbreak. Talus’s insides glowed. Maybe she would grow to love her status as a marked mustang, as a “bird-struck” filly, not for the prestige, but for the opportunity to help others.

“Well,” Talus said, addressing Snowberry, “I suppose you have to return to your range.”

The old dun replied, “Yes, though who knows how much longer it will be ours. Cocklebur won’t be able to defend our territory until his foot heals.”

“What can you tell me of the other bands? Who was culled this year?”

“The young. Yearlings and adults under ten. Purslane was lucky to escape.”

Talus struggled to control her emotions. If Snowberry spoke the truth, Currant, Gentian, Woodrush, and Yarrow may have been carried off by the nameless ones. “Did you see a black mare in the pens? Were her bandmates culled?”

“I don’t remember. The enclosures were more crowded than ever. I couldn’t even keep track of my own companions. But, if you’re looking for somebody, you’ll soon know her fate.
Most of the survivors have made their way back to their home ranges. As news of your family’s run to safety spreads, they’ll want to visit you, too.”

Talus glanced at Fireweed. As she expected, the clay-red stallion appeared alarmed by the old dun’s prediction. No male relished an invasion of his—and his mares’—territory. “Well, thank you for the information all the same,” the grulla said. “I wish you and your friends the best.”

“We are honored to have the blessing of the bird-struck filly,” Snowberry said, turning her head to aim her good eye at Talus. An unspoken message followed: I hope you find your black mare.

The half-blind mustang led her band out of the meadow. Talus, Fireweed, and the rest watched the three strangers depart with a mix of wonder and apprehension. They were only beginning to understand that their evasion of the humans had marked them as different. As exceptional or at least highly unusual. None knew what to think of this new development.

“It seems you’ve become…more than a horse,” Draba said to Talus, struggling to describe her sister’s effect on Snowberry.

“I’m not,” the grulla said firmly. “Though I wish I were. Then I would be beyond suffering and my withers wouldn’t pain me so much.”

Fireweed asked, “If other families come, should I drive them away? I don’t want you to be overwhelmed by visitors when you’re already weak.”

“No, let them come. I’ll tell you if they bother me.”

Over the following days, mustangs from every part of Mount Mesteño arrived in Bergamot Meadow. Talus received each one graciously, exchanging breath and displaying her wound. Meanwhile Thistle, Hopsage, and Draba flanked their celebrated bandmate, ready to
defend her if an admiring tried to touch her withers as Purslane had done. Fireweed and Starwort sized up their fellow males. Both were prepared to set upon any stallion who attempted to steal a mare. But they needn't have bothered. Not even the fiercest, lustiest stud on the mountain had the nerve to go after an associate of the bird-struck filly while guests in her range. All of the encounters passed without incident. Yet they were also extraordinary.

A gray bachelor stared at Talus’s injury for less than a minute before, equally shaken and stirred, he reared onto his hind legs. A roan mare licked the grulla’s face with the tender concentration mothers reserve for their offspring. Two cremello foals approached the young leader at a trot, then slowed to a walk, gripped by a reverence they wouldn’t comprehend for years. Talus was humbled by these reactions. Exhilarated, too. Sometimes she longed to romp with the horses she moved, but her withers couldn’t support a gait faster than a relaxed canter.

A week passed. Talus’s mood soured. Neither Spurge nor Larkspur nor Milfoil had been spotted. Perhaps the entire band, not just Currant and the juveniles, had been culled. The possibility filled the grulla with a queasy fear. She spoke of it to Fireweed, Thistle, and Hopsage. They didn’t understand; their parents had died or lost their freedom many seasons ago. Draba alone could relate. The sisters spent every interval between visits discussing their dams.

“If the humans took mustangs under ten this round-up,” Draba said one evening after the latest family to pay their respects to Talus had left, “our mothers should have been released. Larkspur, too. So why haven’t we seen them? Their territory is close to ours. I thought they’d be among the first to reach Bergamot Meadow.”

Talus hesitated. If she voiced her fears, they would gain color, shape, and texture. If she didn’t, they would populate her mind with inessential yet terrifying imaginings. Direct
confrontation was preferable. “Draba, what if they broke down? What if the humans killed them, like Penstemon?”

“Penstemon was old. Our parents aren’t.”

“No, but they aren’t young either. You saw our dams’ figures. You saw Larkspur’s muzzle.”

The fillies fell silent, each engrossed in her own troubled thoughts. Talus pawed at the grass. It crackled, then tinkled beneath her hoof. The first frost, as brittle as a wren’s egg and as invisible as a freshly spun spider’s web, had arrived. Soon it would fan out across the meadow, forcing the band to head south in search of a warmer home base. If Spurge still lived, she wouldn’t know where to look for her daughter.

“Oh, Talus,” Draba cried, “it’s bad enough to lose Currant and our siblings! How can we confront the death of our mothers, too?”

“By giving ourselves entirely to our current family and coming foals,” Talus said, though she felt as unsure as her sister. She also knew that, regardless of the fate of Spurge, Milfoil, and Larkspur, a long period of mourning awaited her. Currant, Gentian, Woodrush, and Yarrow would never race the wind again. She pictured them in a Thicket of Pens, their eyes dull and their movements listless. It wasn’t fair. The strawberry roan had suffered more than her share of tragedy in her short life. Her dam had dropped dead, charred by lightning, at her feet. Her best friend had snapped a leg and expired before she could say goodbye. Now this. And the yearlings...Talus’s chest constricted with grief when she recalled their youthful faces.

Woodrush’s capture bothered her the most. The loam-colored filly, cursed with her diminutive frame, must have seemed so small and breakable as the humans herded her into a nameless one.
“I hope that will help,” Draba said, “but I don’t think it will. I’ll never be the same without Milfoil.”

Talus admitted, “I’ll never be the same without Spurge. Maybe we never outgrow our mothers. Maybe we carry them inside us until we die, like our blood or our bones.”

As the mountain cooled, Talus and Draba resigned themselves to their dams’ demise. Acceptance didn’t lessen their pain. Both went about their business with little pleasure. The grulla continued to graze at every opportunity—Thistle wouldn’t let her do otherwise—but every bite was a chore. The grass tasted bitter even though winter had not yet sapped it of its sweetness. All of the many springs in Fireweed’s territory had developed an unpleasant flavor as well. When Talus drank from them, she shuddered at the water’s metallic edge. It seemed the whole mountain had gone sour. Had turned as toxic as overripe clover.

Talus didn’t learn what had happened to her natal band until winter had drawn so near she could smell its breath. The scent was clean, brittle, and sweet, like fresh ice. Yet it also contained the faint but rotten patina of death. Many animals would not survive the cold spell about to descend on the mountain. Small things—bats who hibernated in a silken mass or mice pressed against each other in their burrows—would slide from sleep into oblivion. The large would confront a land as white as the evening sun, a land that seared the eye and maimed the spirit, leaving them vulnerable to predators. Talus herself might succumb, might lie down in the middle of a storm and let the snow bury her. The thought frightened the young mustang. She didn’t want her body to become her unborn foal’s tomb.

On the last full day the horses planned to spend in Bergamot Meadow, Talus and Draba grazed side by side, quietly discussing their fears of the coming season.
“Will it really be warm in the sagebrush scrub? Is Fireweed right to relocate us for the winter?” the dunalino asked.

“It will be warmer,” the grulla replied, “but we’ll suffer all the same.”

“I’m scared. I’m scared for all of us. The round-up drained even Fireweed and Thistle. How can a weakling like me or Starwort make it to spring? And you…your injury, Talus. It cost you dearly.”

“I won’t die if you don’t.”

The sisters laughed in spite of themselves. They hadn’t promised each other anything so silly since they ran with their first family. Yet the concept of staving off death with raw willpower touched them in its innocence. In its naivety. Talus recalled her foalhood belief that she could accomplish whatever she set her mind on if her life or the lives of her loved ones depended on it. That way of thinking shattered with Penstemon’s leg.

“Fireweed,” Hopsage called from the southernmost end of the meadow, “I smell horses. Strangers.”

The red dun, who had been browsing not far from Talus and Draba, trotted over to investigate. As he passed, he told the pair, “Don’t worry. They’re probably just more visitors for our ‘bird-struck’ filly.”

Talus followed him anyway. Her curiosity attracted the rest of the mares. Soon the entire band had gathered at the edge of the meadow. The grulla dilated her nostrils and inhaled the frangible almost-winter air. An odor with notes of brush, grass, and clover snagged itself on the fine hair inside her nasal passages. Before it wriggled free, she recognized it as a mingling of olfactory signatures. Signatures she had encountered and memorized on the day of her birth. They filled her with the same expansive awe she had felt when Spurge led her down Mount
Mesteño to meet her family, when, every time the world seemed as big as it could get, another grove or field of wildflowers appeared. Her heart skittered in her chest. She looked at Draba. The dunalino’s features had sharpened with hope. Though neither she nor her sister said a word, Talus heard their shared question on the wind. *Is it them? Is it our parents, those dear ones who shepherded us into life but must face death alone?*

It was. Talus spied a dark shape moving among the junipers below Bergamot Meadow. Only a single mustang possessed a coat black enough to be seen from a distance: Spurge, the mate of Larkspur and best friend of Milfoil. Spurge, the most respected lead mare since Aster. The dam of the bird-struck filly.

“It’s my mother!” Talus cried, her voice strangled with joy. “She’s alive!”

“Do you see my dam? Do you see Milfoil?” Draba asked, standing on her rear legs for a better view.

Talus peered at the junipers. As Spurge trotted out of the last stand of trees and began the climb to the meadow, two yellowish figures shadowed her, one the calm shade of a daisy’s center, the other a wild gold reminiscent of a mountain lion’s fur. “Yes! Milfoil and Larkspur are all right, too!”

“But Yarrow is gone,” Starwort said quietly.

Hopsage nuzzled her son and assured him, “You’ll meet other nice colts soon enough. What a shame, though. He had the makings of a band stallion.”

“The strawberry roan and the yearling fillies are missing as well,” Thistle said. “If we’d been caught, everyone except Hopsage and I would have…Oh, it’s not worth thinking about!”

Yet it was, or at least the horses couldn’t help but think about it. Talus, Draba, Fireweed, and Starwort had come within a single desperate charge of being culled. Had the grulla been a
stride slower, the bird a wingbeat faster, the young family would not have watched another
sunrise in freedom. For the first time, the bandmates reflected on the role luck had played in their
escape. Talus attempted to conceive of the long string of events that had delivered her to the
mahogany thicket. She couldn’t, any more than she could conceive of the empty space at
Spurge’s hip, where Woodrush had pranced.

Finally Spurge, Milfoil, and Larkspur reached Bergamot Meadow. All three appeared
much older than they had before the round-up. The light-colored mustangs studied Fireweed and
his mares with such blank expressions Talus wondered if even the simple act of moving their
facial muscles tired them out. Larkspur seemed especially miserable. He refused to exchange
breath with the red dun; instead, he lowered his head to signal his inferiority. The grulla wanted
to go to him and rest her chin on his withers, but she knew this would only add to his shame. Her
sire was too noble not to take the blame for the loss of his offspring.

Yet neither Milfoil nor Larkspur looked as depressed as Spurge. The black horse’s
bearing had changed. Her sleek body, once brimming with energy, now operated at a sluggish
pace. When she pointed her ears at Talus, they revolved with the extreme slowness of leaves
falling on a windless day. Her eyes also functioned at a lethargic rate. A full minute passed
before they focused on the grulla and regained a vestige of their former spark. Talus trembled. It
was hard to be female. To duplicate yourself, to give a foal your slim muzzle or your clean-
boned limbs or your efficient heart. If that little copy suffered, you did as well.

“Daughter,” Spurge said, “we would have come sooner, but it pained us to return to our
range without Currant and the yearlings. We didn’t hear of your triumph until we talked to a
half-blind mare a few evenings ago.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re here now. And I have something to show you,” Talus said.
The young mustang turned so her dam could inspect her withers. She waited for a reaction, for a sign that Spurge had found a reason to stay alive in her one-time foal’s torn skin. Nothing happened. Far away, a sparrow spun a web of notes, its thin, sweet voice buzzing as it rose in pitch. Talus listened, held in place by the chill beauty of the song and her fear for the black mare. Mount Mesteño, it seemed, had come to a stop. Had pulled up and pricked its ears in anticipation. Talus’s patience succumbed to the extreme stillness. The grulla wheeled around to see if her mother’s sorrow had lifted.

Spurge quivered with pride.
Spring transformed Bergamot Meadow into a swathe of color. Fresh leaves unrolled from the buds on the aspen trees; shot through with sunlight, they glowed a green too youthful and pure for the world. The grass, teal as the carapace of a dragonfly, tossed in a light breeze. Lavender flowers with slender petals—the very flowers that had given the place its name—released a minty perfume. Even better, horses of many hues grazed or groomed each other, swinging their tails lazily.

A magnificent red dun gleamed like the breast of a robin. He surveyed his mates with a soft, loving expression. All three mares, a blue roan, a bay, and a dunalino, tended to their newborn foals. The blue roan nursed a dark brown colt, the bay a chestnut colt, and the dunalino a palomino filly. Meanwhile a star-faced two-year-old fought an imagined rival, practicing for his impending bachelorhood. Only one mustang wasn’t present: a grulla with a scar across her withers. Every few minutes, the red dun raised his muzzle and sniffed the air. He wouldn’t relax until the final member of his family returned.

Talus lay on her side in a bed of lupine and paintbrush. As the now three-year-old grulla strained, the flowers bobbed in an alpine wind, their movements hypnotic, their pollen tart to the equine nose. Above her, the sky glittered the pale blue of sun-glanced snow. Overwhelmed by sensation, she closed her eyes and redoubled her efforts to push her foal from her womb to her birth canal to the mountain. Pain coalesced beneath her tail, where Fireweed had entered her the previous summer. A second later, two flinty objects emerged from her body. They had to be her
little one’s front hooves. Its head, withers, hips, and rear legs would follow. She gathered herself, took a slow breath, and thrust. A tiny but hale horse burst from her in a deluge of brown fluid.

Mare and foal rested, their barrels rounding and deflating as they gasped for air. When Talus recovered, she lifted her head and examined the small creature she had expelled. It was a dun filly. A filly the color of blown sand. She lacked her dam’s size and scope, but her dark gaze roved Mount Mesteño with a patient courage. The grulla realized her daughter couldn’t understand the sights, sounds, and smells all around them yet didn’t mind waiting for the world to make sense. This temperament would compensate for her petite frame.

“Don’t worry,” Talus said, looking at the wilderness that had received her not so long ago, “it only seems big at first.”