

Nasha

THE FIRST DOG

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*To the countless
children of the first dog,
who have loved
and protected
humans for
a thousand generations*

Chapter 1

The wolf pup nestled in Maddia's arms. She looked at the girl with loving eyes as she snuggled into a more comfortable position. The tiny wolf paid little attention to the humans surrounding her in the hut made of animal skins, tree limbs, and branches. All the pup knew is that she was safe and warm.

“Leave the wolf pup where you found her. We do not have food enough for ourselves, let alone a wolf pup. The wolf has been our enemy since the beginning. If you do not return the wolf to where she was, I will take it from you and will leave it far from our camp where you will not find it. I will not be happy to do so, but it is my duty.”

Baratho made his declaration from a position of authority. He had been leader of the clan for many seasons. He sometimes appeared harsh, but he had guided the clan through difficult times. Baratho was a good hunter and rarely came home with empty

hands. What is probably more important is that he made sure that the clan's food was distributed to every person, not just those who had been in the hunt. The members of the clan respected his skill as well as his fairness.

With an inner strength beyond her years, Maddia stood tall. She held the wolf pup to her chest and said softly yet defiantly, "I will not abandon her."

"You must," snarled Gortush, his gravelly voice filled with displeasure. "Baratho has said so."

The words of Gortush came as something of a surprise to all who heard them. He and Baratho were at odds, and those assembled in the hut believed that he would kill Baratho if given a chance. Gortush was a coward, however, and would never challenge Baratho in a fair contest.

Gortush proceeded, viewing Maddia and the pup with disgust. "We should send both the girl and the wolf pup away and let the animals take care of them. All of us will be better off without them."

No one in the hut stirred. The air was so still that those who had assembled were afraid to breathe and break the quiet. Then a familiar voice spoke.

"The wolf pup will alter our world in extraordinary ways. Maddia should not abandon her. I see our lives bound together for all eternity. The Great Spirit has entrusted to us a gift. It is true that the wolves have always been our enemies, but that will change. The wolf will be a friend to humankind for as long as there are days."

Lartha placed the end of her staff cautiously on the ground and rose to her feet. Even though she had lived many years, more than anyone could count, the healer of the clan possessed considerable power. With her words, the fates of Maddia, the pup, and humans were forever entwined.

With a nod toward Lartha, Baratho said, "You may keep the wolf pup, Maddia. I do not understand how Lartha arrived at this conclusion, but I trust that what she says will come to pass. From this day onward, you are responsible for the wolf pup."

Despite trying to disguise his feelings, it was with some relief that Baratho permitted Maddia to keep the wolf pup. He was not an unkind man, and he had a fondness for Maddia. Baratho felt kinship with the animals that shared their world, and like most of the clan, he would kill an animal only for food or to save a human. He would have been saddened if he had to force Maddia to leave the pup.

"Thank you, Baratho," whispered Maddia. Her defiance instantly turned to elation and gratitude, and she bent her head slightly so no one would see the tears that welled in her eyes.

"You may rejoin your family, Maddia. I hope that Lartha's words are correct, and that the pup will grow up to be part of our clan."

As she walked out of the hut, Maddia saw Gortush glare at Lartha and then at her and the wolf pup. *He is not much of a warrior if he considers it necessary to threaten an old woman, a girl, and a wolf pup*, she thought to herself.

Chapter 2

The story of the wolf pup had begun a few days earlier. Maddia, her younger brother Lakus, and her older cousin, Ganni, were searching for the special stones used for tools and axe blades. They were not far from the clan's camp on a level stretch of barren ground at the base of a steep ridge. The boys worked the area near the middle of the plain, while Maddia stayed closer to the ridge.

The growl that Maddia heard was low and quiet, causing the girl to become transfixed. She was positive the sound came from a wolf, but she could not see it. All of them were in serious danger if wolves were close enough for her to hear them.

Lakus and Ganni were a short distance away. She waved her arms frantically and signaled to them to come to her. She did this silently using hand gestures that the clan members knew. The two boys were in a situation where they had no cover, and the wolves would be likely to attack them first. Maddia was by a

cliff that would offer them at least a small measure of sanctuary.

“What is it, Maddia?” asked Ganni when he reached her, breathing heavily from the run. Although a boy, he was bigger and stronger than many men. When groups of children were foraging for edible plants or other things, Ganni went with them as a guard.

“I heard a wolf growl, but I cannot see where it is. I did not want the two of you to have no place to seek protection if more wolves came by.” Maddia scanned the area nervously but saw no wolves.

“But we looked around before we came down from the hill,” said Lakus. “We did what we were supposed to, did we not? How could we have missed the wolves?”

“Yes, we did what we should have,” answered Ganni, “but the wolves might have made their way here while we were hunting for the tool stones. We should go back to the camp.”

“Wait,” insisted Maddia. “There it is again.”

All three of them heard the sound this time, but they could not see its source anywhere. Glancing behind her, Maddia saw a wolf pup in the opening of a deep hole in the rocky wall. It had probably been drinking from a spring when it saw them.

After growling and baring its teeth, the tiny pup crawled weakly into the den. Normally, Maddia, Ganni, and Lakus would have returned to camp. Nothing was more dangerous for a human than to encounter a wolf pup. Almost always, the mother or

the whole pack would be nearby. But the three of them had been watchful before they came down from the cliff to the flat ground to scour the area for the tool rocks. There was no evidence that wolves had been there for days. Believing that the pack had gone, Maddia became worried about the pup.

“I will give the pup some meat,” said Maddia. “Continue looking for signs of wolves.”

“Are you sure you want to do that?” asked Ganni. “We do not know where the pack is. They could appear at any time.”

Maddia didn't wait for Ganni to complete what he was saying. She hastened to the small cave and got down on her hands and knees. Very slowly, she pulled a piece of dried meat from under her garment. She had brought it for her meal along with a seed cake. She moved a little closer to the wolf pup and held out the meat.

The pup raised the fur on its neck and growled feebly. When it caught the scent of the meat, it sniffed and sought the source of the smell. The pup drew nearer to Maddia and the meat. The pup snatched the meat from her, backed away, and began to chew it. From the way it took the meat, Maddia could tell that the pup had not eaten much meat before. She recalled that Lartha, the clan healer, had said that baby wolves drank their mother's milk just like humans. This pup had probably begun to eat meat only recently.

Reaching into her tunic again, Maddia removed a seed cake. She broke off a morsel and held it out to

the pup. The young wolf peered at the meat and then the seed cake. It took the morsel of seed cake from Maddia, chewed it a few times, and then swallowed it. Because the seed cake was softer than the dried meat, the pup had an easier time eating it. The pup then continued gnawing on the dried meat.

Maddia withdrew from the cave carefully while watching the wolf pup, which was concentrating on the dried meat. She did not want to frighten or disturb the pup while it was eating.

Without saying a word, Maddia pulled another strip of dried meat from her brother's tunic, indicating with a nod that it was for the pup. Lakus, who was going to protest, finally understood. He allowed Maddia to take his meat but was confused when she appeared to eat it.

Maddia chewed the meat to soften it as she walked to the cave. The pup glanced at her, but returned quickly to the food it had. Maddia dropped the meat by the pup, who caught the scent of the meat and then seized it, eating this new treat more easily than the dried piece.

Once more, Maddia backed out of the cave. She led Lakus and Ganni a short distance away. She told them in hushed tones that she thought the pup had been abandoned. It was very hungry and terribly thin.

"We can kill the wolf and bring it to camp," said Lakus. "I can wear its skin."

Ganni frowned at the boy but replied sincerely, "There is no pride in killing a tiny pup, Lakus. Besides,

as Baratho has told us, all creatures are our brothers and sisters. We should only kill if we need food or to keep ourselves from harm.”

“You will have many chances to exhibit your bravery,” said Maddia, touching her brother’s arm. “Let us ask Lartha what we should do with the pup. For now, tell no others, not even our families.”

The three of them hurried to camp, carrying the tool stones they had found. As they left, Maddia looked over her shoulder and saw the wolf pup gnawing the dried meat. It paused for a moment and gazed at her. For an instant, Maddia sensed something strange and wonderful, as if a secret were being passed between her and the wolf pup. It was a feeling she would remember for the rest of her life.