

INSTINCT

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Billowing, black clouds shifted in the dark sky above Crowsnest Pass. Wind gusted through the forest. Sturdy pines stood their ground, while lesser trees bowed in submission. Leaves and pine needles thrashed in the air and hurled to the soil. Whitecaps chopped their way across the lake. The ground trembled in sequence with the thunder. Flashes of lightening revoked the darkness in spurts, revealing Crowsnest Mountain across the way in both shadow and afterglow.

On the steep mountainside, the cougar curled tighter on a shale ledge under an overhang. Her dark eyes squinted to protect from swirling grit. She adjusted colossal feet under her sleek muscles, and coiled a black tipped tail around her fur. Powerful jaws gnawed on the tattered bitterroot. She longed to be inside the earth cavity across the way-her home. A much more sensible place to endure the storm, but it was occupied.

The feline stared across the gorge, analyzing Scrota who stood on the mountain peak, in front of the obscure opening, with shoulders hunched and buttocks protruding. Deep-set creases mapped her leather-like skin. Her fists clenched the tops of tall diamond-willow poles, the bottoms pressed to the ground. She stood steady, as debris swirled around her, tangling the long, brown pelt of matted fur covering her 11-foot physique. From a distance - she might look human.

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Scrota's beady eyes followed the clouds barreling overhead. A long sigh escaped her puffed cheeks. The cave had been stocked without much time to spare.

She returned the cougar's hard stare. The large cat shifted its gaze, tucked her head into her chest, and curled into a ball.

Faint whimpers sounded from behind Scrota. She spun and plodded into the cave snuffling over the frail form of velvety black fur. The stillness of his tiny body weighed on her mind. Oakum's stringent scent drew tears to her eyes and snot oozed from her nostrils. Squatting on the rock floor, she lifted her baby and pulled him close. She forced her newborn's mouth open with her thumb and index finger and inserted her milk-swollen bosom. Between shallow breaths, the infant attempted to suckle. He gasped and her nipple flopped out. She placed her fingertips under his eyes, pulled the bottom lashes down, and peered inside. The yellow had spread. With one hand, she pushed the soiled moss from his bed, and scattered dry plants, where his bottom would rest. She placed him on the bed of fir branches and sage leaves, and covered him with long strands of hairy lichen.

Careful to avoid the leaks from above, she shambled across the cool cave, peeked into a small cavity, and pulled out a handful of bunchberries. A bowl-like impression on the cave floor, created by years of water erosion, served her well. She dropped the berries into the mortar, pulled a pinch of lichen from the bedding, tugged tangled twigs free, and ripped long strands into tiny pieces, adding it to the berries. Cold spread across her fingers as her calloused hands cupped clear water from a bottomless pool and dumped it into the mortar. With a pestle-shaped rock, she banged and stirred the red and black concoction into mush. She scooped it with her fingers, and ambled over to her baby. Harsh cold made its way through her thick fur as she sat on the stone floor. She lifted his

head, slid the nourishment between his dry lips and scraped the last of it on his gums. He gagged. Her moans echoed as he slobbered his only hope of survival down his hairy chin.

A lump formed in her throat. Visions of the females in her tribe entered her mind. They were strong and would know how to nurture this child back to health. She was not intelligent like they were.

Familiar grunts from outside the cave startled her from her thoughts. Her breathing quickened to rapid snorts; her eyes darted around the cave. Oakum's father had found them. With trembling hands, she gathered Oakum into her arms and scurried deeper into the cavity. She hunched to place his thin body inside a crevice and yanked her stock of wild ginger and spider-flower plant leaves over him. The leaves will help hide his scent.

Faking strength in her weakest moment, she bustled toward the cave's entrance, braced to face her biggest fear. Pink petals and green leaves fluttered to the floor as she looked over her shoulder.

He was a well-respected elder in their tribe, until he went mad, and started butchering his offspring. The rest of the tribe had done nothing to intervene. One never questioned an elder. It is forbidden. Scrota had questioned it, and fled with their baby. Now his eleven-and-a-half-foot shadow stooped, blocking what little light the storm allowed in. The pungent stench of his black wet fur blanketed the cave. He slithered his tongue over yellow jagged teeth. His beady brown eyes glared at her and released a phlegmy, deep snarl as he pushed her aside. Nostrils flared, sniffing for the scent that curtailed his sexual needs. Scrota scrambled to her feet, flopped her head in her hands and

forced out a deep raspy moan. She must convince him she was grieving for their deceased baby. If he knew Oakum lived, he would find and kill him. He could not allow his females to be preoccupied with nursing a baby. It interrupted his urges from being properly satisfied.

Sniffing, snorting, he looked suspiciously around the cave, turned, and grabbed the fur on the back of her neck, and bent her stomach over a large rock. He had waited long enough.

Rage consumed her; she swiveled, thrust her knee and crushed it against his groin. Gulps gurgled from his open mouth. Wide eyes stared back at her; his hands clutched between his legs. With a powerful push, she leaped toward him. Her sharp fingernails raked his face, his compressed flesh pressing the dirt deeper under them. He pulled his arm across his chest, and swung with a great backhanded force across her temple. She slammed to the ground, pain pulsating through her head. Flashes of light interrupted her darkness as she scrambled to her feet. She did not see the second hit coming. She dropped to the floor and moaned.

Because she fought him, he would know their son lived.

He stepped over her and scrambled deeper into the cave. Snorting, sniffing.

The sudden crack to the back of the head slammed him hard to the ground, her rock aim right on target. He swayed, eyes blinking fast. She leaped on his back, releasing a wild beast-like screech, slamming them to the floor. Her frantic hands grasped a large rock and lifted it high, before smashing it onto his skull with relentless force; her ferocious screeching muffled by roaring thunder. She pounded his head, until his gurgling halted and the bloodied body stopped twitching.

Gasping for air, she crawled across the cave and kneeled next to the pool. Her trembling hands scooped water and funneled it into her mouth. The clear water clouded with red. She collapsed onto her stomach, her heart pounding hard against the cold floor until her baby's faint cries filled the air. With quivering arms, she pushed her heavy body up, The room wavered as she walked her hands along the cave wall, and stumbled to the secret cavity. Smudges of red trailed where her hands had touched. Her bloodied fingers shoved the leaves aside and pulled her baby into her arms, carried him back and laid him on his open bed.

Her shoulders drooped. She did not like to kill.... killing is wrong.

Her palms and fingers tingled from the sensation of the heavy rock. The mashing of his soft skull skulked within her soul. His body twitched and moaned in her memory. Flashes of a noble and caring mate invaded her thoughts. She had loved him once. But she loved her son more. A long slow breath filled her lungs. She stumbled on shaking legs towards a small cavity in the wall, and pulled out a Monkshood root. She rotated the core between her fingers thinking of the times she had sneaked here to hide these supplies. She gazed at the pile of lupine pods and seeds with hope that she would never have to use that stash of poison, nevertheless, if she had to, she would be sure to do it right. She gazed over at her moaning baby, her only reason for living.

With hunched shoulders, she stood over the bloodied corpse, drew in a deep breath, wrapped her fingers around his wrist and grunted as she dragged the carcass into the splattering rain. Harsh winds slapped at her, as her feet slid on the slippery shale.

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The cougar swayed in the ruthless storm, standing on her shelf, stretching her neck towards the cave. She scrutinized the struggling creature rolling a body to the edge, and giving it a final push over the side. The hairy bulk picked up speed as it bounced off the jagged rock face

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Scrota would bury what was not of interest to the animals when the storm lifted. Rain drenched her fur as her she stared at her witness. The cougar dropped her head and slunk far back on the shelf. Scrota shook her wet hide, sending water droplets back into the wind before reentering the cave. Using a sharp chunk of chert, she hacked off a piece of dried bitterroot, shoved it into her mouth, choking it down for the sake of her milk flow. Jolts of pain shot to her back as she massaged her full tender breasts.

Guilt swam inside her; she covered her eyes with her palm and convulsed with sobs. She pushed tears away with the back of her hand, drew a deep breath, and shuffled over to her stock, picked up the clay chunk; squatted and dipped it in the pool, then kneaded it into a thick paste, and smeared it on her baby's swollen stomach. He lay motionless, barely breathing. She pushed what remained on her hands to her fingers tips, and worked it into a thin consistency before coating the inside of his mouth with it.

Fatigue swirled in her head; she collapsed on the floor. She awoke with the break of dawn, to her baby's strong cry. Hope shot through her, chasing away her grogginess. She pulled him close to her bosom. He latched on tight and suckled with vigor. As her full breast collapsed, she chortled forcing her finger between his mouth and her nipple to break the suction. Tears streamed down her face as her baby howled when she pulled him from the empty breast and shifted him to the bulging one. His impatient cries turned to

satisfied suckling moans. With a contented baby cuddled in her arms, Scrota drifted off into a delicious deep sleep.

Screeches from an owl, resonated throughout the valley and pulled her from a long day's rest. She squinted and blinked, awaking to the cooing of her baby.

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The cougar's weary eyes took in the night. The round moon illuminated billowing white clouds as it pulled itself from behind the lake and up through the blackness that sheathed the sky. A perfect replica shone in the still water below. Settling in the crest of the heavens, the moon's glow gravitated towards the earth silhouetting the slender pines that reached a hundred feet or more, from the valley floor. Stars danced in the darkness sending cascading light sparkles over The Crowsnest Mountain, positioned perfectly under the nocturnal glow. The moon's light shimmered on the sleek black feathers of the large birds circling above the forest canopy as they called out one last time before roosting on the gnarled tree for the night. Caww caww

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Scrota stood outside the cave, with face tilted up and arms reaching out. She pulled the fresh air into her nostrils, filling her lungs before releasing it slowly. Scrota focused on the owl's eyes. They shone like the moon, reflecting a mouse dashing for home. The rodent filled the owl's vision as it swooped to the ground and plucked it from the world.

Across the way, the cougar coiled, her powerful jaw gnawing on a well-fleshed bone.

Scrota returned to the cave, scooped up her baby and ambled to the pool of water. She grabbed a handful of buffalo berries and squished them between her palms. The red mush oozed from between her fingers. She rubbed the pulp into his fur. He gasped and held his breath each time she blew in his face, before submerging him into the water. She fluffed his wet fur with her hands until it dried and dusted him with sweet smelling powder she had ground from Devils club bark. She handed him a horsetail rootstock to soothe his teething gums.

He gnawed on it.

She rubbed the red berries of the Devil's club into Oakum's pelt until it shone, and then wiped the remainder on her matted fur. The tiny creatures that clung to their coat did not like this. She scratched her neck at the thought of them.

Infant clinging to her side, she scrambled down the mountain. She skidded to a stop. The night air carried a strange scent. Fur on the back of her neck stood and prickles ran down her spine. She grabbed the scouring rush stem that Oakum was using as a whistle and covered his mouth. His wide eyes stared back at her; his body stiffened. The strange-smelling wildlife she encountered held a great resemblance to her kind, but stood curiously smaller with very unusual fur. They carried moons. That impressed her, but their lack of instinct alarmed her. She recognized the scent--the smell of their fear. They made loud noise and pointed at her. Scrota pivoted and darted into the forest with a speed that surprised her. She would have to go the long way home to ensure she was not pursued.

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The cougar, leapt from her perch. Her leg muscles bulged and flexed with rapid swiftness as she bounded into cave. She charged to the back, and shot up into a cavity, concealed with twigs. Two kittens stirred in their bed of leaves and let out a faint mew. They whimpered and suckled her breast milk from her gorged titties while she warmed them with her tongue. Instinct had served them well.