

THE SPEAKER



S. L. Thorne

The Speaker

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The Speaker

**by
S. L. Thorne**

**For Ivan,
My Gaganan**

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THE LEGEND OF UKTENA

The Cherokee have a tale they tell of a monster they call Uktena. This creature is not exclusive to them, but it is their story you find most common. What follows on this page is my compilation of those tales, my version as it features into my story. It will help you to understand the undercurrent of the tale.

There are tales of a serpent-like being, horned like a deer, with seven bands of colour around its neck or seven spots depending on the storyteller, great moon-like eyes and a single, scintillating jewel in the middle of its forehead. This creature lives in deep, still waters, sometimes in rivers or deep caverns. Where it lives no wildlife thrives. For miles from its resting place, you hear no sound, not bird, animal or insect. To stray within its reach is to risk hearing its call. Animals will raise their heads suddenly and just walk off, hunters set down their bows and walk away, never to be seen again. To come upon it waking is death. To come upon it sleeping... is death. Something about it draws the viewer towards rather than away. But some... some can break that spell, some are overcome by the fear of it and flee. For them something far worse than death awaits. When they return home it will be to find their loved ones dead in their stead.

But Uktena can be killed. Its heart lies beneath the seventh band. Should an arrow find its way there it too can die, and the hunter's loved ones will be safe. The jewel in its forehead is powerful magic. It can give one insight to the future, heal, bring good hunting and great luck for the tribe of the one who keeps it. But it is a dangerous thing to keep and few wish that responsibility. It binds itself to its keeper, demands things of him, marks him for all to see.

CHAPTER ONE:

Beyond the Door

“It is a full scholarship,” said Seven Trees pausing to take a puff from the decorated pipe being passed about the council circle. Her old voice was still strong in the dim, smoky room. “So... there will be no financial burden on the tribe. Not to mention a huge opportunity for our little Silver.”

Elk whistle accepted the pipe from her with a chuckle. “You should look again, Seven Trees. Our Sooneawa is not so little anymore. She is a grown woman.”

“Not yet,” snapped the sullen voice of Cold Heart of the Mountain. “She is still only seventeen. And until that time all decisions of her fate are ours to make. And I say she stays here.”

“Daki’inde!” exclaimed Seven Trees. “How can you ask that of her? She dreams of being a vet and here is her chance, her only chance I might add, to go to University to become one and you want her to throw it away? When was the last time one of the people were extended such generosity?”

“Exactly,” she harrumphed, jabbing the air with a bony finger. “When? Why now, eh? What good ever came of what the white man has to offer?” She shook her head, sending the wooden beads adorning her braid wraps rattling. “No. It is for her own good we keep her here. She is a magic child. We cannot allow the white world

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to corrupt her or steal her from us.”

“She may *be* magic, Daki,” came the calm voice of chief Falling Elk, “but she cannot *make* magic. As such, her absence will be no hardship to the tribe. Her return, however, will bring us great things.”

Cold Heart turned to the old chief. “Not what I have seen,” she sniffed imperiously. “Great tragedy will befall if she leaves the protection of Silver Rose Mountain. She will suffer at the hands of those white devils, be tainted by them.”

The chief, to her surprise, nodded. “Lizard has visited me too, Daki’inde. He brought me powerful dreams and I tell you this, if you ask her in ten years if it was all worth it, she will answer unequivocally yes. Either way, it is her choice to make.”

“She is my niece, old man,” she growled, desperation beginning to mar her judgement. “Don’t you forget that. As her only living relative....”

“Don’t argue with me, old woman,” he said with a calm voice that nevertheless cut her off as sharply as if he had snapped. “You gave up the right to do so ten years ago when your sister died. You decided then that you did not want to deal with a child and surrendered her to the tribe for raising, even though that meant you would not inherit her property. If the girl wishes to go to this Cordel University, then I say she should be allowed.”

“The girl is a Speaker, Falling Elk,” she said. “We cannot allow the whites to find out we still possess magic. She is too valuable, I tell you!”

At this, another woman spoke, this one older than them all. Her hair was so white it was almost translucent, and her braids fell in coils on the floor. Behind her on a short perch stood a raven easily three feet tall with an ancient gleam in his fierce black eye. Her own eyes were nearly solid white, clouded over by cataracts she refused to have removed. “The child a Speaker may be, but she is not a Memory. As such, it matters not if she leaves us because she can never leave us.”

Seven Trees frowned, passing the pipe to the older woman with a small bow. “How can that be, Spider?”

The old hands reached for the pipe, found it without error though she never turned her face. Only the raven’s head moved to watch. “Think about the girl’s name, child,” she said, took a long puff of the pipe, let the smoke slowly curl up and around her head, making strange shapes in the air which the bird watched intently. “She will take us with her wherever she goes. She will always be in the ‘shadow of the mountain’.”

“Just because her name loosely translates to Silver Rose Mountain, and I mean loosely, does not...,” Cold Heart tried.

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“Loosely,” Spider said. “Which places her in the *shadow* of the thing?”

Cold Heart tried one last argument. “What about her Nijii Manidoo? It is unlikely that the school will let her bring a pet. It is not safe for her to go without him,” she added with finality.

“Actually,” grinned Elk Whistle, his eyes dancing, “I have read these pamphlets. One of the six dormitories is encouraging the students to bring a pet, something small and undisruptive. There is a group of graduate students running an experiment on the campus, testing the theory that students allowed animals will be calmer and more receptive to study and thus get higher grades. Gaganan will not be a problem.”

“I still say...”

Spider had had enough. “Cease your prattle, girl. You make my head ache. You have lost. Accept this with grace.”

“We are agreed then, all but Daki’inde?” asked the chief.

Everyone nodded, even old Pipestone, who had sat swaying silently, listening to some tune only he could hear throughout the whole argument. “Then the child will be allowed to accept the scholarship.” Cold Heart silently fumed, refusing the pipe when it was passed to her. “Now we sit and smoke,” said Falling Elk accepting the pipe. “Mmmm, good tobacco, brother. Some of your best I’d say.”

“That’s the deer tongue,” nodded Elk Whistle.

Seven Trees tossed another small braid of dried sweetgrass into the fire, watched the fragrant smoke curl towards the hole in the domed roof. No one acted as if they noticed when Cold Heart of the Mountain stormed out of the council chamber, slamming the ‘flap’ closed, except for Pipestone, who only half turned his head before holding out his hand for the pipe.

Outside, Sooneawa waited with two of her friends. Tuwe and Memenqwa were seated on the fence just outside the stone wigwam where the council met. Most of the official buildings on the Silver Rose Mountain Reservation were made of modern materials, but shaped to resemble native dwellings. Sooneawa leaned back against the fence post, fiddling nervously with the feathers adorning her braid wraps. She stood as the door opened, watched her aunt storm out in a black mood and her heart leapt. She waited until her aunt had passed out of earshot before turning to her friends.

“Ninoshenh Daki’ is furious,” she said, barely able to contain her excitement. “That can only mean one thing!”

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“You’re being allowed to go!” Memenqwa finished for her, hopping off the fence and throwing her arms around her friend with a squeal.

“Congrats! You are coming back for the wedding, right?” queried Tuwe.

Memenqwa looked up at him, stunned. Recovering quickly, she hit his knee. “What the hell kinda proposal is that?”

He blinked, “You mean I haven’t asked you yet?”

“NO!” she growled, her fists on her hips.

“Damn that Lizard... I’ve got my dreaming and reality mixed up again.”

She jumped him, knocking both of them backwards over the fence, rolling in the grass. “I’ll show you reality!”

A large cat, possibly of the Maine Coon variety, mostly white with uneven black markings that covered most of his back and head, walked up and sat down next to Sooneawa. He peered over the bottom rail at the tussle. *At it again are they?* he purred.

Sooneawa nodded, setting a foot on the fence and resting her arms on the top rail. “Yup.”

What’d he forget this time?

To ask her to marry him. Thought he had already asked her, she mewled.

The cat sighed, looked up at her. The white point that aimed up from his nose almost bisected his face, leaving the black cap looking more like a mask or cowl. He blinked his green-gold eyes at her. *So when are we leaving?*

The undecipherable argument from the couple in the grass was becoming more frequently punctuated by giggles as they rolled closer to the underbrush.

“Haven’t been told officially yet. So I don’t know.”

He hopped up onto the fence post. His bulk made the process look much more precarious than it was. *I saw your aunt. Heard her fume. Convinced you are going to run off with some white man and get your heart broken.*

She snorted. *More like afraid I am going to dilute the bloodline farther.*

I don’t think she likes you very much, he observed.

Resents me more like.

Tuwe, having finally pinned his girlfriend, sat straddling her hips, holding her arms down. “Well? Will you marry me or not, woman?”

“What did Lizard tell you?” she growled. “Makwa Zoongi!” she chanted in Ojibwe. Her strength spiking, she threw him off despite his leverage, sent him flying into the brush. “What do you think?” she added, throwing herself in after him with a growl. Both of them disappeared into the foliage.

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The cat climbed into Sooneawa's arms and the two of them walked off. *Oh, there they go again. There'll be kittens by Spring,* he muttered.

Sooneawa crossed the fence into the pasture some distance from the council house and found an oak with broad spreading limbs to sit beneath and think. Gaganan, the cat, hopped into the grass at her side. It was high summer, so she was wearing a calico sundress that had been her mother's and he spread out a fold of her skirt and curled up on it. Together they watched the dragonflies zooming through the air like flying jewels. She buried her hand in his fur, massaging the wiry muscles beneath the loose skin.

Johnny Southbend walked past on his appaloosa and paused, sighting her under the tree. "So, Nea. Are you going or staying?"

"They haven't told me yet," she smiled. "Though I believe they have made their decision."

"Well, good luck! You'll be the first to go beyond junior college in 60 years. Maybe you'll bring a little prosperity back with you, eh?"

She laughed. "Oh, I intend to open my practice on the mountain. Got my eye on a place just off the reservation proper, so the traffic doesn't spoil the peace around here."

"Sounds good. Say, have you seen my nephew around? I got that bracelet he wanted me to pick up in town. You know, the one he wanted engraved?" he said with a knowing wink.

Gaganan laughed, covered his nose with his tail. *A little late for a wedding band,* he snickered.

She tried to keep a straight face. "You won't find him right now, but... in a little while,... he might reappear across from the council building."

He hung his head. "That boy get lost in his dreaming again?"

She chuckled. "Tuwe never gets lost in his dreams. It's reality that tends to confuse him. Needs more attention from the dragonflies."

"I'll get him later then. Good luck," he waved, nudging the horse onward.

Speaking of dreams....

Yes? she purred, turning to the cat.

Take a nap.

"Why?"

Look at your mocc, he said flicking his tail towards her shoe. There was a lizard perched on the upper ridge of the beading, basking in a fragment of sunlight.

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“Oh,” she said. She settled herself back against the tree, finding a more comfortable position without disturbing the lizard. “Fine,” she sighed and closed her eyes.

Sleep did not attempt to elude her. The buzzing of happy insects combined with the still warmth of the high summer sun lulled her quite easily. She was unaware of the transition, even when she opened her eyes to a sound near her. She was still lying against the oak tree waiting for the elders to come and inform her of their decision. As a tribal orphan, when her aunt refused to accept her, she became a ward of the tribe and unlike other Mainganoden children who only had to get permission from two parents, she had to acquire the permission of the whole council.

She reached down without looking to take comfort in the warm fur body beside her only to find cool scales instead. She looked, saw a large yellow snake with eyes like sapphires curled up in the grass in the cat’s place. She froze, having wisdom enough not to jerk away. The snake raised its head, part of its upper coils easing across her lap, the thick, scaled body gliding smoothly beneath her hand. Their eyes locked, the fanged mouth opened, venom dripping from the pointed tips.

Just out of sight, a horse screamed and the snake turned. Sooneawa looked up to see a white horse with black markings on his flanks, chest, ears and the crown of his head rearing over her. He had one deep blue eye and one brown and brought his full weight crashing down on the snake, just missing her. The snake turned on him, striking but its fangs only grazed the leg.

Sooneawa started to move, to ease away from the fight, but the snake turned again, seizing hold of her arm with its tail. The horse continued to trample the serpent, his hooves striking with grace and precision even when the snake tried to tighten its hold upon her.

Soon the snake lay dead and the horse took it in his teeth and tossed the carcass away. She reached out to touch the thin line of blood marring the horse’s snow-white limb and noticed the blood on her own arm. She looked down and saw that she was splattered in the snake’s blood but there was not a mark on her.

The horse nudged her cheek, nuzzled at her neck. She stroked the underside of the great head, but the animal kept pushing at her. Finally, he purred in her ear.

She woke with a start, turned to see Gaganan’s face by hers, his paws on her shoulder. *Well?* he asked expectantly.

That was... disturbing, she rumbled, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him into a hug. He did not resist, rather began licking whatever part of her

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he could reach. *Apparently you are going to rescue me from a snake.*

Oh I am, am I?

“Well, I think it’s you. It was a black and white horse... a medicine hat. And you are my black and white medicine. My spirit guide and guardian. What else could it mean?”

“Could mean quite a bit,” said Chief Falling Elk.

Sooneawa looked up at the grey-haired man leaning on the fence rail, gazed into his strong, chiselled face with a start and scrambled to her feet. “Yes, Grandfather?”

He looked her over a long moment. “Walk with me,” he said then turned and began walking towards the stream that cut through the reservation.

She ducked through the fence and fell into step with him. The cat followed at a respectful distance, eagerly observing all around him.

“Tell me about this dream,” he said.

While she really wanted official confirmation whether or not she was being allowed to go, she obeyed, describing everything in as vivid detail as she could remember. She quickly found that the only parts of the world that had been truly clear to her were the horse, the snake and the oak at her back. Everything else had been somewhat fuzzy.

The chief took it all in, nodding sagely. “So you think the horse is Gaganan?”

“Well,” she said, thinking about it. “Yes, I am almost certain. That the horse was a medicine hat kind of cinched it, his being a guardian and all. That and being black and white, not red. Most Medicine Hats I’ve ever seen were red, brown or blonde. What concerns me most is the snake. They are healing medicine, and though this was a constrictor, it had venomous fangs and it was definitely a threat.”

“You are certain it was a constrictor?”

“Yes. The head wasn’t broad enough. It looked a lot like that albino python Tuwe’s brother has. Except that I saw the venom. It wasn’t a real snake. I am concerned that the medical training I seek....”

“Will somehow try to harm you?”

Sooneawa nodded.

“My child, knowledge itself cannot harm one. It is how we gain it and what we do with it that can bring harm. If you go anywhere you expose yourself to danger. This walk we are on right now exposes us to snake bite, to falling, to mountain lion if we travel far enough. In your dream, you were not harmed, though the hooves of your protector struck close.”

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“It clipped me once, I felt the sharp edge of the hoof, but it didn’t hurt. And I was covered in the snake’s blood when it was done.”

“Which probably means you will not emerge unscathed, only unharmed.”

“Oh, I forgot. The horse’s eyes were mismatched. Brown and blue.”

“Ah, well then it cannot be Gaganan, as his eyes are green and gold. But you want to know about our decision and not your dreams, ...unless they change your mind about going?”

She stopped. “I can go then?”

He smiled. “Yes, granddaughter, you can.”

“There is a condition!” came a cracked voice from across the stream. They looked to see Spider Yellowbuck, in her worn leathers adorned with bird skulls and beads, leaning heavily upon a gnarled walking stick. Her raven was in a tree nearby.

“It is a little late to impose conditions, Memory,” frowned Falling Elk.

“Listen to me, you young rip,” she growled. “I shall impose what I please when I please as the spirits insist. And this condition Eagle sets.”

Sooneawa felt her heart tighten. Eagle was the far-sighted spirit, the giver of Vision Quest and the connection to the Great Spirit and his plan. He was the one who chose the Memory’s successor. Sooneawa had a good mind and decent recall, but she had been eternally relieved when she had failed Spider’s test years ago. The last thing she wanted to be was the Memory’s apprentice, to lose herself in the history of the tribe. Not that she wasn’t curious to see things the way the old one did, to know first hand the stories of their lives. She was just unwilling to pay the price, to lose herself in the tribal memory.

“What condition, Yellowbuck?” he sighed.

“The condition,” she began, turning her blind eyes to Sooneawa, “is that when all is said and done ...you will know the time... you return to us. That you return to us what is ours. What is mine.”

Without another word or an explanation, she turned and hobbled away, the raven soaring on an updraught and hovering above her like a giant black kite. A tiny breeze blew up, whisking past her face and she watched a single black feather float through the air and land in the stream. The feather sailed along the current until it snared on a rock at her feet. She felt she had no choice but to pick it up. She stood there, fingers trembling as she turned the blue-black feather over. She felt the chief put his hand on her shoulder.

“Do not fear, granddaughter. You are not the Memory, nor will you be. She has told us this. You are not pure enough.”

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She gave a choked laugh. “Of blood? If that is one of the criteria then soon we will have no Memory. Our pure blood numbers are dwindling, and if my aunt has her way we will be more inbred than the royal families of old Europe before long.”

“No, of mind,” he corrected. “Your impurity lies here,” he said, touching her forehead, “and here,” touching her heart. “You are about to go out into the white world, to learn white medicine. That taints you, but only for *her* purposes. We do need you back,” he smiled with a chuckle, “but go with our blessing.”

She hugged him, making him laugh. “Yes, I know what this means to you, to learn the healing of the animals. But do not forget our ways of healing too. You must also remember not to allow them to know your gift or your true worth. There are some who will not take it well, or who would seek to abuse it. Let the magic regrow in their own kind first, before we reveal what we have never lost. Now if you go see Seven Trees, she is getting some money to buy you what you will need for school.”

Great: shopping, Gaganan growled. *I think I’ll stick around here, thank you, ...go chase some frogs.*

“Suit yourself!” she laughed as she danced off.

The old chief sat down beside the cat next to the stream, stroked the large, black head. The cat let him, closing his eyes. “I know you understand me, Gagaanwaanikwe. I know you cannot answer me, but heed me. You are going to be limited where you can follow her. You who are her bridge to the spirits, you may be able to ask spirits to watch over her for you. ...I have dreamed terrible things for her.”

The cat looked up at him, meowed something he could not understand, but guessed at its intent. “I know that, on the whole, she will look back on them without regret, so I do not fear letting her go. She will need these events to grow and find her way. As you are her bridge to the spirit world, she will be our bridge to the outside world. We need her. Bring her back to us.”

The cat sagely nodded, then turned to eye a frog swimming near the edge of the stream.

CHAPTER TWO:

The Parting of Ways

The bus roared into the Clarkstown station and jerked to a halt. Sooneawa gathered her things, including the soft-sided dog carrier at her feet which housed a very unhappy and mortally embarrassed Gaganan. He found the whole process undignified and had complained loudly during the early part of the trip. The old woman in the seat ahead of her was convinced she had a bobcat in that crate. Needless to say, no one moved to help her get her things off the bus.

Eventually, she stood on the edge of the campus green, in beaded jeans, a flowing, embroidered blouse and her quilled moccasins, with just about everything she owned hanging from her person in the various totes and satchels she had been able to acquire from the local thrift store back home. She felt oddly liberated, even under the burden she carried. She was nervous, but excited, looking forward to the newness of it all as she moved into a line on the grass that was marked: Freshmen Housing Assignments.

There were two tables at the end of the line. One marked A-M, the other N-Z. Guessing this was a division of surnames, she stepped into the first line.

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Anytime now, Gaganan growled after about an hour of standing.

She hushed him, giving him a chirr that was low enough no one else would suspect anything. *Just a little further. Better they not see you. There is a size limitation on animals which you exceed. So make yourself as small as possible.*

Five minutes later she was standing before a rather tired looking grad student who asked. “Name?”

“Sooneawa R. Majiwe.”

He frowned. “Spell it?”

She obliged. The young man flipped through his lists, found her and then glanced at the carrier in her hand. He groaned. “Another Randall Hall. What’s in the cage? There are size limits and only quiet dogs allowed.”

“Oh, it’s a cat.”

“Fine, whatever,” he said, not quite believing her. “Over there near the rhododendron. They’ll tell you if you qualify or if you have to be reassigned,” he added, jerking his thumb towards another long line full of unhappy students touting inappropriate pets. “Freaking nightmare, I tell you.”

She dragged her belongings over towards the tall shrub sporting fistfuls of naked stamens, finally setting everything down amid the faded and much-trampled magenta blossoms that littered its base. The people over here looked slightly less harried but still busy. More pleasant at any rate. One of them was dealing with an upset student who had slipped in with a noisy rag-mop instead of going to the reassignment line as asked. The man finally resolved the issue by assuring the girl she could remain in the dorm, provided she bring in an acceptable pet within the week. The girl went off in tears, nuzzling the little dog, and apologizing in baby talk.

Nea was listening to the dog’s whimpering *I wanna go home, don’t wanna stay, too big, too big, too many big!* when the young man approached her.

“You’re next,” he said with a tired smile. “Name?”

“Majiwe,” she said, turning her attention.

He flipped through his list and confirmed her. “Ah good, it says you have a cat.” He looked down. “Wow, big cage. That’s ... a dog carrier,” he frowned. “Did you change your mind?” he asked with a sigh. Apparently, that had been happening all too frequently.

“Oh, no. He’s a cat. It was the only carrier I could find. I’m on a strict budget. Besides, it was a long trip and I didn’t want him too cramped,” she said. It was not exactly a lie.

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He bent down and peered in, making soft *pssspssspss* noises to call the cat forth.

Gaganan lay crouched at the far end of the carrier in a ball of fur and meowed at him. What Sooneawa heard was a badly overacted: *Oh go away, dreadful human! I'm afraid of all this change and bumping and noise!*

"He's a little... over-stimulated from the bus," she apologized, trying to hide a grin. "I can let him out for you to get a better look."

"Oh, that's not necessary. I dare say the poor thing's traumatized enough for one day. He's really big..."

"He's really fluffy. He's a long hair."

"Oh, ok," he chuckled and walked back to his table to get the paperwork. "Bet he looks like a drowned rat wet; next to nothing to him."

I'll drowned rat you, Gaganan growled.

She nudged the case with her foot as she bent over the table.

"I'm Mike Moorland," he said, offering her his hand, which she shook. "I'll be one of the liaisons with the experiment. I'll be stopping in occasionally to check on things, make sure there are no conflicts or factors which could jeopardize the experiment or otherwise colour the data. You'll need to sign these documents here, stating that you are aware that your grades will be accessible via double-blind to the scientists running the experiment, and giving your consent. One of the requirements for living in Randall Hall this year. Don't worry, they will be assigned a number at the office and there is no name attached to that number. Just sign on the X's."

While she signed the papers, he pulled a few other things from the packet. Once she handed them back to him, he stamped them with a seal and signed them.

"There you go," he said, handing her the duplicates. "Your copies, and..." he passed her a red plastic tag with the number 334 engraved below the words: Randall Hall, "his tag. He'll need to wear this with his regular licenses. It's your room number in case he's found. Here are your keys and if you head up that slope to your right, Randall Hall is the Gothic looking brick building on the left."

She shuffled off as quickly as possible, getting out of the way of a goth girl with a ball python wrapped around her hand. Once she was a little ways off from the checking-in tables, she bent down and let Gaganan out.

About time, he swore. Half in, half out of the crate, he paused to stretch himself, working out the kinks in his body after being cooped up in that bag for so long. *Excuse me,* he grunted, trotting for the bushes nearby.

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While she waited, she rearranged her things to carry them more easily, folding the carrier up and putting it into another bag. *That's SO much better,* he sighed, returning. He butted his head against her hand and fell into step with her.



The dorm was good-sized: a four-story, Gothic building of dark red brick. There were no elevators in the older building and several students dragging their things up the two broad staircases. With Gaganan leading, she managed to navigate herself and her belongings up to the third floor without trouble and stopped outside room 334.

The door was open to reveal a spacious area. There was a floor to ceiling wardrobe on either side of the door which served as headboard to the single beds. There was a space of about eight or nine feet between them and, at about the same distance from the foot of each bed, stood a pair of desks under the windowsill with a counter in between them. There was a small fridge beneath that.

Her roommate was already present, deciding where to put things. She was a comely black girl with a medium-sized black poodle lying docilely on one of the beds. The animal's head came up as they entered. His mistress turned, saw the cat and set her hand on the dog's back. "Easy Handsome."

Gaganan stopped in the doorway, eyes locked on the dog. *Is this going to be a problem?* he asked, preparing to protect himself.

The poodle was an older dog, greying more than a little at the muzzle. *Is that a cat or a lion?* he sneezed.

Nea chuckled. *Cat. And he'll be no trouble if you'll be no trouble.*

The dog sighed and put his head back on his paws. *I'm too old for trouble.*

Reassured by the dog's response, the girl had turned to greet Sooneawa when they both heard a very loud, "Oh HELL no!" from down the hall.

They popped their heads out with just about every other girl on the floor to see the Goth with the python standing in the doorway of room 326, her stuff on the floor, the snake around her neck and her fists on her hips. A snicker from Gaganan made Nea look down at the threshold at the girl's feet. *Riki-tiki-tavi wannabe!*

Bouncing up and down at the end of a leash in a red harness was an albino ferret. It surged forward and the Goth jerked back. "Get it away from me!" she cried.

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The RA came out of her room at the end of the hall and stormed over to sort out the problem. “What is going on down here?”

A southern drawl drifted out of the room as someone tried to reel in the ferret. “Predatory issues.”

“Allergies!” snapped the Goth.

“Ok, hold on,” groaned the RA. She went back to her room and came back with a clipboard. “All right, Rebecca...”

“Hecuba,” she corrected. “My name is Hecuba.”

The RA rolled her eyes. “All right, ‘Hecuba’ Halstead, one ball python... nothing here about allergies. Julia Divot, one ferret. Well, I’ve got no choice but to move you, but which and to where? Any volunteers?”

Before she could look up from the clipboard, half the hall was empty. The RA sighed. “What *aren’t* you allergic to?”

Sooneawa and the girl with the poodle looked at each other. The girl held out her hand. “Jenny.”

“Nea,” she answered, shaking it. They shared a knowing look between them, Jenny glancing from the cat to her dog (and not seeing much size difference between them). “So which do you want?” Nea asked.

“I’ll take my chances with the snake unless you think your cat will eat the ferret,” Jenny said.

Nea smiled. “Oh, I think it’ll amuse him, but he won’t hurt it.”

She, Gaganan corrected. *And *she* is a lunatic. But I don’t want you in the same room with the snake.*

She looked down at him. “It’s not an albino,” she told him aloud without thinking. Jenny gave her a strange look but headed out into the hall.

It was not meant to be literal, he growled, waiting for her to pick up their things and follow him down the hall. *But I’m taking no chances.*

As she approached, she watched Jenny pick up two of Hecuba’s bags for her. “You got anything against poodles?”

Hecuba looked her over, glanced down the hall at the black muzzle peering out at them. In absence of the frizzy show cut, she seemed to soften. “He looks cool. Come on, Princess,” she said to the snake, rubbing her cheek against its head. “That nasty weasel won’t harass you down here.” She collected the rest of her bags and followed Jenny.

Gaganan walked right into 326 and headed for the window, perching on the sill to watch the birds in the tree just outside. *Nicer view.*

The Speaker

Neither the RA nor Julia was quite sure what to make of this.

Nea paused beside the girl with the clipboard. “Sooneawa Majiwe. And no, Gaganan won’t eat her,” she added to Julia who had finally managed to pick the ferret up.

“At least that’s settled peaceable... wait... that thing is a cat?” the RA gaped, cross-referencing her list with what now lay in the window. His body, from outstretched paw to twitching tail-tip, took up most of the sixty-inch sill.

“Looks more like an alligator with fur,” tittered a girl from across the hall. She felt something scoot between her feet and took off down the hall after a tan and white bunny yelling “BAXTER!”

The RA looked apologetic. “Let me see your papers for him.”

Nea set her things down inside the door and pulled them out. The girl looked very flustered. “Moorland signed them himself. How much does that animal weigh?”

Nea got a sinking feeling. “He didn’t weigh him and I’m... not sure at the moment. The pamphlet didn’t say there was a weight limit on cats, just that they be box-trained and not overly vocal. He meets those criteria.”

“What kind of cat is he? Not a wild breed...?”

Nea breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh heavens no! He’s Maine Coon.”

Am not, he simpered. Nea ignored it.

“They get that big?” Julia asked with a raised eyebrow. “Ah knew they were big but... he’s over a yard long!”

“He’s only thirty-eight inches, nose to tail. The longest recorded cat is forty-seven, I believe, and that was a Maine Coon.” She turned back to the RA, “I promise he’ll be very well-behaved. A perfect gentleman.”

She sighed, shaking her head and handing back the papers. “He’s already been cleared. Nothing I can do. Just ...keep him out of trouble.”

The RA walked off, leaving Nea face to face with a freckled, red-haired girl in a gingham blouse and faded denim. “You shore he won’t eat my Lulabelle?” she asked, her sky blue eyes wide with worry.

Nea laughed, began hauling her things inside. “Positive.” She paused to rub the ferret’s forehead. “However, if you cause mischief, little miss, he will pay you back in kind. So play no tricks you can’t handle having turned back on you.”

Lulabelle stared at her, pink eyes wide. *I understood that,* she blinked. *ALL of that! Can you understand me?*

Nea gave her a tiny nod and a half wink.

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The tiny fanged mouth came open. *You can... I can... we can... halowya!! Hoohooo!* she exclaimed, began dancing in Julia's grasp, making the tag hanging from her neck jingle.

"Oh, that reminds me." Nea fished the tag reading 334 out of her pocket and walked back down to the room. She rapped on the half-open door.

Hecuba answered it, her dark eyes glittering beneath the heavy kohl liner. "Yes?" she asked, drawing out the word in a very serpentine way.

Nea held up the tag. "I know you aren't likely to need this, but... do you have one by chance with 326 on it? I *will* need it."

She took it, disappeared for a moment, returned with the other tag. She hesitated before she put it in Nea's hand, then said, "Thanks. By the way... that cat is cool."

Thanking her with a smile, Nea went down to her own room to begin unpacking.



Three hours later the two girls were lying on their beds watching Lulabelle playing with a motorized ball, tired after having unpacked and rearranged the furniture to their liking. Nea's bed and desk had swapped places, with Nea's headboard now the side of the fridge. They had tried it the other way around, but Julia had not been comfortable by the window. Since the building had heaters but no A/C, leaving the windows cracked was just too much for her.

"So how much *does* Gaganan weigh?" Julia asked.

"About forty-five lbs."

Julia gave a low whistle. "Shore there ain't no wild cat in thar?" she giggled, swinging her feet in the air.

"No, I'm not. Though it is unlikely," she smiled.

Julia laughed. "So what kind a' name is G'ganan anyway? And where ya'll from?"

Nea got up and pulled a tin of homemade pemmican from her desk drawer, offered some to both Julia and Gaganan. She gave a piece of dried blueberry to Lulabelle. "Manitoba. I am an Ojibwa of the Mainganoden tribe. And Gaganan's full name is Gagaanwaanikwe, which almost literally translates to, embarrassingly enough, 'fluffy'." Julia made a face. "Hey, I was six when I named him," she said in her own defence.

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“No, it’s not that... I got a... sour piece,” she said, puckering, reaching under the edge of her bed for her soda can.

“Oh. There are a few of the berries that were less than ripe,” she muttered, shrugged and helped herself to another bite. “Your turn.”

“Well, I’m from *Jowja*,” she drawled, over-exaggerating the word Georgia. “Rome specifically. Lulabelle don’t mean nothing,” she laughed, “just somethin’ I liked the sound of. I’m here to study art. You?”

“Vet,” she answered, swallowing, passing Gaganan another piece.

“Oh, you are so going to fit right into this dorm,” Julia grinned.

“One can hope.”

The two girls talked until fairly late, finally rolling into bed. Lulabelle was put in her cage to keep her out of trouble and Gaganan flopped himself down on the sill above Nea to get the most out of the slightly cooler outside air.



The next couple of days were spent getting ready for classes. Nea had to make several trips to the financial aid offices to get her scholarship checks for her books and tuition. They had a small subsistence check for her as well. She and Julia visited the cafeteria and weighed the costs and advantages of getting meal accounts versus feeding themselves out of the communal kitchen on the floor and buying their groceries from the small Mom and Pop on the edge of campus. Comparing their schedules, they decided it would be worth it to get a ten meal a week program for the cafeteria for lunches and dinners when their schedules were cramped enough to not allow them time to go back to the dorm and to split grocery bills for the rest of their meals.

Gaganan was thoroughly ticked off at being subjected to the indignity of a collar. She mollified him by eventually putting the room tag on a black leather thong around his neck, explaining the legal necessity of the matter. He sulked for several days until she put a bobcat tooth on there as well.

Two days in, a computer arrived for Julia, fresh from the factory with a stack of three dimensional and digital imaging editors and creators. She began plugging it all up immediately. Nea helped, though she had no real clue what she was doing. There was even a tablet!

“Wow,” she said. “Your parents went all out.”

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“Nah, my uncle’s an oil baron,” Julia explained, trying to reach behind the tower to plug things in correctly. “No kids of his own, I’m his only niece... he thinks I’m gonna be some famous artist someday and he spoils me, I’ll admit. I notice you don’t have a computer. How come? You’re going to need it if you’re goin’ ta med school.”

“Can’t afford it. My parents died when I was seven. Since my aunt, my only living relative, didn’t want me, everything went to the tribe as a whole for my care.”

Julia stopped, mouth open. “Everything?”

“Well, I have keepsakes, but everything else was put in trust.” She handed her a coaxial cable, watched as she passed it through the back of the machine. “There wasn’t much money or things that could be sold, so I rely on the council for everything. And they can’t really afford a computer for me. We have one on the whole reservation, in the education centre, but it’s shared and more than a little outdated. If I hadn’t managed to get a scholarship, I wouldn’t even be here.”

“Man, I thought one set of parents was bad. Having to answer to a whole tribe? Why didn’t your aunt want you?” Julia asked, hopping off the desk and situating things from the chair.

Nea shrugged. “Never approved of my father for one. He was half Lakota, half Quebecois. Plus, I guess at the time she just didn’t want to deal with a seven-year-old. I don’t know. I didn’t mind it. I never really liked her very much.”

No accounting for taste, yawned Gaganan.

Nea watched as Julia booted up the new machine and started loading the base program platforms. “As it was I had a huge family instead of just a small one. I had lots more *me* time, and I had Gaganan so I wasn’t lonely. In fact, it’s probably the reason that I was able to get the scholarship. I mean, I was homeschooled on the reservation with the other kids, and able to work at my own pace. I took courses at the community college, took more standardized tests than I ever want to see again during my application process, and managed to exempt myself from most of the first-year courses. I put in a lot of work to get here, which would never have been possible without so many people looking out for me.”

“You should write a book,” she grinned. “That’s one hell of a story. Tell you what, when I’m not using it, you’re welcome to work on my computer if you need to.”

“Thanks, but they have a computer centre.”

“Which closes at ten. You’ll want to work later than that. I insist.”

“OK, OK,” she laughed. “I yield.”

CHAPTER THREE:

Dragon Eyes

The first quarter rolled by, filled with exciting new experiences and interesting people. Nea's grades were high despite a heavy course-load. Moorland dropped by just after the first grades came out and seemed very pleased. So far the first quarter grades were twelve percent higher than the grades over at Belmont Hall across the quad, which was the control half of the experiment. Moorland wanted to throw a party on the Green for Randall Hall residents and their pets but those in charge felt that it would add additional elements that might unfairly skew the data.

Activities were going on almost constantly on campus: re-enactment clubs, academic as well as Greek fraternity sponsored events, dramatic productions. At the end of every quarter, the drama department held a production which was the midterm or final exam for the drama students. When the weather was warm enough this was held on the Green, usually in the round. This quarter was Othello, played at night. Julia and Nea went, with Gaganan tagging along, and sat on blankets on the

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grass and watched the production wrapped in a quilt, and, in Nea's case, a moose hide cloak. The cat curled up on Nea's lap and peered out. The big surprise, aside from the very unorthodox interpretation, was the appearance of Hecuba as a very powerful Desdemona.

That weekend Nea took a break from schoolwork. Temperatures had been dropping slowly over the past few weeks. Saturday had dawned no different. Then, at about nine o'clock, a Chinook wind dropped down the mountain slope and everybody dropped everything and went outside to enjoy the sudden heat in spite of the strong winds that accompanied it.

Nea, Julia, Lulabelle, and Gaganan headed out to the Green to enjoy the sun for however long the warmth lasted. Julia was used to the cat following them around almost everywhere but classes. She kept her ferret on a leash, but let her play in the grass with a leather ball.

Nea lounged on the lawn, braiding her hair. She had one encased in its leather braid wrap, decorated with strands of wooden beads. The other wrap lay on her lap as she swiftly and neatly plaited her waist-length, ebony hair. The cat was playing with the ferret, who had completely lost her fear of the larger animal, letting her stalk him. He backed over Nea's lap, heedless of what he was stepping on. She pulled at the fringed wrap to rescue it from the melee and the black raven feather came loose, stuck under Gaganan's toes.

Sheepishly, he lifted his foot, but before she could grab the feather, the wind caught it. Nea launched after it. She managed to re-capture it several yards away. She carefully inspected it to make sure it was not harmed and stalked back to where their things were strewn on the grass. She glared at Gaganan. He stared back, tail down, ears half back, not sure how she was going to react. Without taking her eyes from the cat she handed the feather to Julia. "Hold this," was all she said.

Julia took the feather, though she was confused, watched Nea stalk forward and the cat creep back. Even Lulabelle was frozen as she watched. Julia gave a squeal as Nea suddenly lunged for him and the two of them tore off across the Green, weaving in and out amid the blankets of others out enjoying the warm but windy day. A couple of dogs stopped to watch, one getting hit in the head by the Frisbee his owner threw because he had stopped paying attention. Finally, Nea managed to cut Gaganan off and threw herself at him. She landed around him, scooped him up and the two rolled in the grass, tussling.

He didn't use his claws, though he batted at her, kicking and writhing to get free. *Hey, hey, HEY!* he shrieked when her fingers went to the pits of his

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forearms and tickled. He made a spring-like jerk and landed a yard away, crouched with all four legs splayed, green eyes wild. A couple on a nearby blanket edged away as he began a low growl, narrowing his eyes. *That was cheating.*

“Oh yeah?” she taunted with a grin, rolling into a three-point football stance. “What are you going to do about it, furball?”

She read his body movements to the split-second he launched. She leapt to the right and bolted, running full tilt with the cat hot on her heels. She dodged past the picnic area where several boys were lounging and into the nearby trees. They were widely spaced, providing shade more than a wooded area, and changed the ‘field of battle’ considerably. Nea laughed as she darted in between them, trying to keep a trunk between her and Gaganan at all times.

She was quite a sight from a moderate distance. Half her hair streamed loose down her face and back, the other half neatly braided. Her jeans comfortably hugged the curves of her hips and thighs, and the white peasant blouse accentuated her modest bust and her creamy bronze skin tone.

At one of the picnic tables, Jonah Jacobi sat back, leaning his elbows behind him on the table, watching the antics of the girl playing tag with the monstrous cat. His dark blue eyes sparked as he watched her, somehow unable to tear away. “Coleman,” he asked, his eyes never leaving her. “Who *is* that girl?”

The boy in question, a rather short, portly, broad-shouldered young man, craned his neck to look between the trees. “Must be a freshman, I don’t know her. Another damned savage. That’s what, three now?” he sneered.

“No, can’t be a freshman,” injected Tolby, who was rail thin with wiry red hair, as he peered over his shoulder. “She’s in my microbiology class. Not freshman stuff.”

Jonah waited in silence a long moment before he growled, “Well, does she have a name?”

Tolby shrugged. “Maji-something or another. She doesn’t talk much. Top in the class though. I think she’s part of the Randall/Belmont experiment.”

Jonah rolled his eyes and tore his gaze away from the girl. “Obviously.” His mind began churning, his instincts locking certain gears into place, refusing to let them turn off the image of the First Nation girl that was burning itself into his mind. Fine, he would have to work around them. He spoke without turning, his eyes on a small dog playing Frisbee on the lawn before him. Even so, he could still see the girl darting in and out of his peripheral vision like a fey thing. “Find out who she is. I want to know everything. From her course of study to her mother’s maiden name.”

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Tolby's jaw dropped. "Jonah, you can't be serious? You're actually *interested* in her?"

"She has a certain... exotic beauty even a dead man would find attractive," he mused.

"Ok, yeah, she's a nice piece of ass, but J.J.... she's a bloody savage! They're poor, dirty, prone to substance abuse..."

Jonah turned, levelling his piercing gaze on the red-haired boy causing him to wither visibly. "I'm not planning to marry the bitch," he snarled, turned back to observe her directly. "Just... use her."

Coleman gave a cruel chuckle, calling Jonah's attention to him. "That will be your job, I think, Coleman. You have the access. Get into her records. I want everything."

In the stand of trees, Gaganan had managed to get her out into the open. They stood at a standoff; both in a half-crouch ready to dart or pounce. His ear flicked off to the side and he began circling right. Nea backed slowly away, reading every nuance of his body to alert her which way to dodge.

Gaganan's head suddenly went up, looking east away from the mountains looming above the school and town. Nea took the opportunity to bolt, zagging to the right. As she turned to watch where she was going, a figure, previously bent over, began to stand right in front of her and the pair of them collided. They fell amid the leaves in a heap, limbs tangled and the legal pad he had been writing on flapping in the wind a few feet from them.

After a momentary sorting of knees and elbows, getting them out of various tender places, Nea found herself looking up into the most startling pair of eyes she had ever seen. They were a beautiful sky blue at the core but surrounded by rims of warm brown. The first thought that crossed her mind was 'dragon eyes'. She couldn't explain it. Her people didn't have any traditions of dragons as the Europeans saw them; only Uktena and his moon-like eyes. But that was the first thing she thought of, gazing into those bi-coloured orbs. It just... fit.

Nea felt a paw on her forehead, looked up into Gaganan's bright green-gold eyes. *Tag, you're it,* he laughed.

The young man leveraged himself off of her, helped her to sit up. "You all right?" he asked.

She nodded. "Nothing hurt but my pride."

He chuckled. His voice was mellow and warm and his laugh rich. "That yours?"

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She glanced at Gaganan, “Yes. Though I think he would argue for the other way around. I am so sorry about that. I didn’t break anything, did I?”

“Just my concentration. It was probably my fault. I dropped my pen and you probably didn’t see me.”

“Didn’t help that I wasn’t looking.”

Sure are looking now.

Nea suddenly realized she couldn’t tear her eyes off him. He was lean and wiry, only a little taller than she was, with thick dark hair that tended to fall in ringlets where it fell just past his collar. He had very boyish good looks, and those eyes she just couldn’t seem to get enough of.

“Where’s the camera?” he said suddenly.

“Camera?” she repeated, started glancing around.

Arm length left of his note pad. Which is very interesting reading, by the way.

She reached over and picked up the old camera, which was closer to her than to him, and handed it back. He checked it over carefully.

“Henry’ll kill me if anything happened to this. Damn it! The settings shifted. And I have no idea how they’re supposed to be set.” He sighed. “No more pictures today.”

As he reached for the pad, he stopped, watched as the pages rattling in the wind suddenly ceased fluttering, slowly began to shift the other way. He looked at her nearly bare arms and his own woefully thin sleeves and snatched up both the pad and the pen lying near it. He got up and pulled her to her feet. “We’d better get inside. I’d guess we have about five minutes before what we have on isn’t enough.”

Gaganan ran off towards where they had left Julia, leaving Nea to bid a hasty farewell and chase after him. The young man stood there a few moments more, watching her run across the lawn after her cat. He was about to follow when the wind shifted sharply again and nearly sent his pad flying once more, and a chill down his back. He had no choice but to turn and hot-foot it to the east side of the lawn and the safety of Cather Hall.

Nea arrived in time to help Julia gather up the things they had brought outside. She collected her feather and braid wrap and the two of them ran to the south side of the Green and into the back door of the dorm. The back hall was crowded as were the basement rec rooms as no one seemed too willing to head up to their rooms yet. Julia, with Lulabelle hiding in her shirt, Gaganan and Nea headed up the almost empty staircase to the third floor.

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Halfway up they were passed by a man charging pell-mell down the stairs towards the first two floors clinging to his pants in one hand, using his shirt with the other to hide his identity. Not far behind him was Marilyn, the third floor RA yelling that when she found out who he was she'd have him kicked out of the dorm. She didn't catch him. When they reached the door to the third floor, she had turned around and stormed past them to the fourth floor to consult with the RA there, muttering about something being done one way or another.

Their room was just a door off the back staircase, and they slipped in without any further incidents. There they collapsed on their beds and burst out laughing. Julia was already red-eyed from laughing herself to tears watching the chase scene outside and seemed about to start again. She pulled on a sweater while Nea changed her clothes and threw a bag of popcorn into the microwave that now sat on top of the fridge.

"That was the funniest thing I have seen in a long time. Imagine, playing tag with a cat like he was a dog!" Julia exclaimed.

Nea looked at herself in the mirror and decided to unbraid her hair and redo the whole thing, picking dead leaves and grass out of it as she did. "That was a very short game, actually. He didn't have time to cheat by climbing a tree," she teased, giving the cat's tail a tweak.

"Naw, he just recruited someone to interfere for him," Julia giggled, as she tried to get a writhing Lulabelle out of her harness. "Hold still, wiggle-worm. I swear he saw that boy stop right in your path. Gaganan was herdin' you right into him."

"He did, did he?" Nea glanced at Gaganan who suddenly became very interested in the pop-pop-pop from the microwave. The cat sat calmly in front of the fridge and stared up at the lighted window at the slowly swelling bag as if it were a television. Lulabelle bounced around him, waiting as eagerly as he was, if a bit more exuberantly.

"Soooo, who was he?" she asked in a singsong voice.

Lulabelle continued hopping around the cat, bouncing in front of the fridge, chanting, *OooOoo, white stuff, fluffy luffy popstuff! Gimmegimmegimmebite!*

"Huh? Oh.... I... I didn't get his name."

"Ya didn't get his name!" she cried. "Y'all were all tangled up like a collapsed game o' twister and ya didn't interduce yerself?" Her drawl thickened considerably.

Gaganan, finally tired of the ferret, reached out with a paw and casually held her down.

The Speaker

“Well,” Nea began defensively as she pulled out bowls for the popcorn, including one small one for the ferret. “We were too busy apologizing, then looking for his camera and then the wind shifted and you saw the rest.”

Julia pulled the popcorn out of the microwave and opened it, pouring it out into the three bowls Nea laid out. “Yea, but... was he a dreamboat or not? I mean, I liked what I could see but what’s he like up close?”

“Not sure really,” she confessed, tossing a piece of popcorn to Gaganan before setting his bowl down. “All I remember are those eyes.”

CHAPTER FOUR:

Casting Stones

Mid-November saw a package waiting for Nea at the post office. She was just opening it when Julia came in from her Art History class.

“What’s that?” she asked.

As soon as the flaps were lifted, she grinned. “Birthday presents!”

Julia dropped her books on the bed. “Birthday? You didn’t tell me your birthday was comin’ up. When is it?”

“Tuesday.”

“Y’all don’t leave a girl much time, do ya?” she complained, with her hands on her hips. She relented and pulled a chair over. “Well, go on, let’s see. ...If’n you don’t mind my seein’, that is.”

Nea grinned. “Of course not. Ooo,” she exclaimed, pulling a painted tin out of the box and flipping open the small tag. “Grandfather Elk Whistle’s Cran-Apple-Elk Pemmican!”

“Grandfather? I thought you only had the aunt,” Julia frowned.

Nea laughed. “I do. There are three words for Grandfather, one which means my father’s father. One means my mother’s father. And the last means everybody’s grandfather. It is a term of respect given to elders or great spirits. Those are the kinds of grandparents I have. In English, if we mean our blood relative, we

The Speaker

generally say ‘my grandfather’ or something like that. Oh good, she sent me more soaps. I was almost out of shampoo.”

Julia watched her set a small parcel wrapped in birch-bark on the bed. Gaganan sniffed at it and sighed dreamily. *Roses again. And violets I think.*

Julia inspected the parcel, sniffing it herself. “Mmmm smells nice. There’s shampoo in here?”

Nea nodded, “It’s solid, like a soap. I love that stuff. My aunt and I may not like each other much, but I’m still family and she makes the best soaps.” She pulled out a final package at the bottom, neatly wrapped in a buttery deerskin. She unfolded the leather in her hands and gasped.

“What? What it is?” Julia asked excitedly.

Nea held up a pipe about a foot long. The stem was carved of elkhorn and trimmed with tiny seed beads, tufts of fur and a spray of golden eagle feathers. The black pipestone bowl was carved with a crow that faced the stem, its wings protectively spread. Beneath this was a small deerskin bag decorated with a rearing horse in seed beads. The horse was a black and white medicine hat.

“That is really beautiful,” Julia gasped. “But what kinda present is a pipe fer a girl? I didn’t think you smoked.”

“Not cigarettes, no. This is a sacred tool. The pipe and tobacco are sacred to our people. You’ve never noticed I tend to keep some in my bag? One gives a pinch to the spirits and to the animals and plants that give you gifts, like their meat or their fruit.”

“Oh. So you don’t smoke that thing,” she said hopefully.

“Only on the right occasions. One of which will be tomorrow night... which you may join me if you desire.”

“I don’t know,” she frowned.

“This is not like your cigarettes. There is nothing here but pure herbs and tobacco, nothing addictive. It is an honour to be given a pipe. A great honour, especially one adorned with eagle feathers.”

“Eagle?” her eyes went wide. “Ya mean those ain’t dyed turkey?”

“No, these are genuine golden eagle feathers. I know because it was my father’s pipe. I’ve only smoked it once, the day Gaganan and I...” she stopped, rethought what she was about to say. “The day he was given to me. He was a birthday present. And six is a special number to us.”

Not quite the truth, he purred.

The Speaker

She rubbed her cheek against his, *and not a lie either. You were ‘given’ to me twice, remember?*

Details details, he purred.

“Um, ain’t eagle feathers illegal?”

Nea shook her head, “Not for me. Verifiable members of the First Nations are allowed to use them for sacred purposes.” She went to the desk and pulled out a small hammer and a couple of long nails. These she drove into the wall over her bed and carefully hung the pipe on it, draping the tobacco bag from the stem nail. “Just to warn you, I will be smoking that on my birthday. If you’d rather, I can find another place to smoke it.”

“We might want to. Just ‘cause I don’t think we’re allowed ta smoke in the dorm,” Julia said thoughtfully, running her hands over the soft deer hide.

Nea smiled, catching the subtle ‘we’ which said her offer had been accepted. “I’ll look for a place today. By the way... I hope you know I’ve never smoked a pipe with a non-native. Living all my life on a reservation I’ve never really had white friends.”

“By that, I hope ya mean I’m special or privileged or somethin’,” she grinned.

Nea laughed. “Yes, I meant it well. I just want you to know how special this is, what it means to me to share this with you.”

Julia smiled, headed for the fridge. “Oh, I do,” she said, began pulling out stuff for a sandwich.



After her afternoon class, Julia went down into Clarkstown looking for something to give Nea as a birthday present. She found a tiny little shop run by a Haida woman and decided to ask for help.

“Maybe y’all kin help me,” she drawled to the woman and her daughter, who was sitting behind the counter beading a bag. “I have an Indian friend whose birthday is tomorrow. I have t’ find her a present. She’s also invited me to smoke her new pipe and I really don’t want to embarrass myself or mortify her, so ... could ya help me at all?”

The woman smiled. “How close a friend, dear?”

“Roommate. We’re pretty close I guess. She said I’d be the first white she ever shared a pipe with, does that help?”

The Speaker

She looked back at her daughter and the two exchanged glances. She turned back to Julia and nodded. “Oh, yes. How old will she be?”

“Eighteen, I think. We’re both freshmen up at Cordel,” she smiled, grateful to have help.

“What tribe?” the daughter asked, setting aside her bead-work.

Julia thought a moment as she admired a pair of beaded peacock eye-feather earrings. “Ojibwa, Maingaden or something like that.”

“Mainganoden?” she asked, pausing.

“Yeah, that’s it.”

The young woman looked at her mother who had looked confused. “They from the wolf clan.” She shifted into Algonquin, “*Silver Rose Mountain, the magic people.*”

The mother’s eyes went wide. “Oh,” she said in English. “That will need something special. Do you know her totems? Tell me about her.”

Julia spent a few minutes explaining what she could about Nea, about her cat, and the horse tobacco bag, the crow on the pipe, the few things they had talked about over the last few months. After a little while, the daughter went into the back room, telling Julia to look around a while, she had to find something. Julia did so, admiring the moccasin collection they carried, trying on a few. She decided to buy herself a pair of mukluks for the snow season, and the peacock earrings ‘just because’.

While the mother helped her find the right pair of boots, she gave Julia advice on how to handle and prepare for the pipe ceremony, explaining to her how important it was and how honoured she was at being invited. Finally, the daughter returned with a small flat box.

She set it proudly on the counter and opened it to display a quill and bone hair-pipe choker with silver rose beads. The centre-piece of the four-row necklace was a piece of hoof carved to look like a horse in a medicine wheel with two small crow feathers dangling below it. Julia grinned. “That is perfect.”

“*What took you so long, daughter?*” the woman asked in Algonquin as she rang up the purchases.

“*The centre-piece.*”

The mother nodded and smiled at Julia as she accepted her money.



The Speaker

The next morning Nea got up and headed down the hall to the shower. She took the new soap her aunt had sent her, washing her hair with the rose and violet shampoo bar. She heard other people enter and leave while she showered. She took her time, enjoying the warm water cascading over her body. Finally, she dried off, got dressed and stepped out of the stall.

Hecuba was standing at the row of sinks right across from the showers applying her makeup. She looked up at Nea's reflection when she heard the door open and smiled. "Wicked," she said, nodding with obvious approval.

Nea frowned. "What is wicked?"

"The witch-lock. That's new for you, isn't it? Very cool," she added, turning back to applying a layer of silvery black lipstick.

Nea stepped over the mirror beside her and dropped her shower basket in the sink. Her hands flew to the left side of her wet hair. The lock of hair at her temple was a nearly translucent silver, ran all the way to the tips. "Oh no!"

Hecuba stopped, closed her lipstick and turned to stare critically at Nea, weighing something in her mind. "I take it you didn't have that when you went to bed?"

Nea was in a near panic, she was not thinking clearly when she answered. "No, I've had it as long as I can remember, but I've always hidden it. Memenqwa swore it would last until at least Christmas."

"What would last?" Hecuba's voice was calm, pointed.

Nea turned to see the girl leaning her hip against the sink, her arms folded, watching her closely. "I..." She couldn't think of a thing to say, and lies did not come easy for her. "What I... was using... to hide it," she stammered.

"Some kind of charm?" Hecuba asked with a knowing look in her eye.

"Charm?"

"You know... Craft. Spell. MAGIC."

Nea did not have to answer. Hecuba read all she needed in her face. She walked around the row of sinks and checked under all the toilet stall doors, then repeated the same on the shower side. She stopped beside Nea, fingered the silver lock. "What kind of charm did this 'Memenqwa' use? Do you know?"

"I... I can't... I'm not supposed to..."

Hecuba smiled. "It's OK. We're alone. I'm a green witch. If your Memenqwa is a witch too, I might be able to figure out what happened and how to fix it. Though I don't know why you would want to. If it were mine I'd wear it proudly."

Nea flushed. "Meme is not a witch, she's *anokiamanj*. A wonder worker."

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Hecuba nodded. "It's different, but magic none-the-less."

"And I don't know why I hide it. I've done so all my life. My mother or my grandmother started it. I just know it won't take dye. Meme usually rubs it with a mixture of ashes of blackthorn and a dark clay, and chants over it. She has a spell she uses, but... I can't wield it the way she does."

Nea groaned as she looked in the mirror at the bright strands contrasting the black of her hair. "Besides, I get nasty looks enough just being here without this to make me stand out more."

"And they call your people savages," she snorted. "The question is, what is different this morning than all previous mornings? If the spell should have lasted another month and a half, why did it choose now to end?" Her eyes fell to the overturned basket in the sink and began putting things back in it, examining everything. "You ever leave this where people can get to it? Check your bathrobe pockets," she advised, pointing at the white terry towel robe that now lay on the floor with Nea's nightdress.

"Not really, why?" she asked, picking it up and searching it, finding nothing in the pockets.

"Never know. There are some of us out there that use our power for personal reasons and others of power are a threat to them. That's why I usually wear black a lot, to protect myself. Though, I don't know why you can't cast. I can tell you have the power within you. Maybe you just haven't found your outlet yet." She held up the newest bar of soap, noting the still crisp edges. "Um, any of this new?"

Nea picked up the shampoo bar. "Just that and this. But my aunt gave me those for my birthday. They came yesterday so no one could have tampered with them."

Hecuba checked the shampoo bar out, sniffing it, prodded at a withered purple flower poking its head out of the edge. "Does your aunt know you use magic to dye your hair?"

"Yes. She walked in on Meme and I doing it this last time. She did not disapprove... which was shocking in and of itself. She disapproves of everything."

"This aunt a practitioner?"

Nea hesitated but nodded. Hecuba held the soap out to her, "Then why would she put snapdragon in your shampoo?"

"What? No, those are violets," she said, taking the bar and examining them.

"No, those are snapdragons. Commonly used in the Craft for 'breaking enchantments'."

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Nea was stunned. “What... why would she... Maybe a mistake? But no, she doesn’t make mistakes like this.”

Hecuba began putting her things away, zipping them up in their little bag. “You said she disapproves of everything?” Nea nodded. “She approve of your coming here?”

Nea thought her heart had stopped a moment as she stared into Hecuba’s darkly glittering eyes.

“Thought as much,” Hecuba said, grabbing Nea’s towel from the floor. “Come on, put your head down, wrap your hair in this.”

Nea did so, even though she was confused. Once it was securely tucked turban style, she picked up the rest of her things. “Now what?”

“Now you follow me.”

Hecuba took her down to her room. Handsome lay on Jenny’s bed snoring loudly. He stirred when the hall light poured into the room, but laid back down when he saw it wasn’t his girl.

The room had undergone some changes since Nea had last seen it. Jenny’s half was mostly unchanged. But on the other side, a white curtain had been hung that draped from floor to ceiling and confined what had been the bed. Hecuba closed the door and locked it, first looping a miniature hangman’s noose of black cord on the doorknob. She then dropped her things on the floor of her wardrobe and directed Nea to set her things on the desk chair.

When she drew aside the curtains, Nea saw that a loft had been built and that the bed was now up top with maybe two feet to spare. The frame was nowhere to be seen. The sheets, she noticed, were black.

Beneath the platform was a carefully draped altar with candles, and a small cauldron resting on a hotplate. Hecuba tied back the curtains and lifted the drape on the altar to reveal a cabinet with many tiny drawers in it. She pulled out a metal basin, set it on the altar and began to toss in a selection of herbs she pulled out of various drawers. Finally, she went to the counter between the desks and grabbed a large teakettle that sat beside the tank Princess slept in.

“Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right back.”

Nea sat down on the edge of Jenny’s bed, gently stroked the soft fur of the sleeping dog. She smiled as he grumbled in his sleep. *Rotten squirrel, disturbing my rest... rattling on the window all day. Oughta drop him in with the snake.*

I’ll just sic Gaganan on him for you. How about that? she asked.

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He cracked an eyelid, peeked up at her. *Oh, the lion's girl. Yeah, maybe. That'd be nice. Joints hurt. Can't chase him myself.* He settled back down to his nap, though his ear flickered to the door. *By the way, the lion's at the door.*

As she looked up, she heard a scuffle just outside as the door cracked open and Gaganan forced his way past Hecuba. "Damn it!" she swore. "That is one strong cat. Don't let him disturb Handsome."

Gaganan placed himself in between the two beds and glared at Nea, his whole body fluffed up and venting his anger. *What are you doing in here!* he snapped. *I'm in the room waiting for you to come back from the bath and you don't come back and I find you in here with her,* he hissed, his ear flicking in the direction of the python who was watching the entire exchange from her tank with disdain.

Nea didn't answer him, just took down her hair. The sudden widening of his pupils had nothing to do with the dimness of the room. *You let her see that!* he fumed.

I didn't let her anything, she yowled, no longer worried that Hecuba was standing at the door listening to her chew out the cat in full-fledged feline. *She saw it before I did. Cold Heart sent me something that broke the spell Meme put on it. She's a wonder worker. She's going to fix it I think.* "So cool your jets," she finished in English.

The cat suddenly sat down and glared at her. He glanced at Hecuba who was staring wide-eyed. Suddenly, she reached behind her and shut the door. "I told you, you had power," she said, then poured most of the water in the kettle into her cauldron.

Is all the roaring over with?

"Oh, yea, Gaganan. Handsome would like you to take care of a squirrel that hangs out on the ledge. He wants to feed him to Princess but hasn't the get-up-and-go he used to."

You're telling her?

If this works, she retorted, *I'll be inviting her to a smoke this evening.*

The cat's mouth opened and closed for several minutes as he tried to comprehend what was happening. *Why? You barely know her. Julia is one thing... the snake's pet is another. She may be that thing which bites you, you know. The poison half of that constrictor viper. Have you thought of that?*

Then her eyes would be blue, and they are not. Colours were just as important. The black medicine hat, the yellow snake with blue eyes. I have thought about it. And I am comfortable with this necessary revelation. He continued to

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glare at her through slitted eyes. *Would you rather I walk out of here right now and head to class like this?* she asked, holding out her silver lock. He looked away, heaved a deep breath. *I thought not. Let her work. You can watch. She is undoing my aunt's mischief.*

In answer, Gaganan stood and hopped onto the bed, curling up next to the dog who raised his head to look at him, then shrugged and lay down again.

“Fight over?” Hecuba asked, slowly stirring her cauldron.

Nea sighed. “For now.”

“He's no ordinary cat, is he,” she said flatly.

Nea shook her head. “No. He is...” she stopped when he gave her a low warning growl. “A guardian, sort of,” she said instead of what she had been about to say.

Hecuba nodded. “He doesn't trust me. I understand. With true magic so rare, and half the world suddenly so ‘all magic is demonic’ again, I can understand the mistrust. If something doesn't change we'll be headed for another burning time.”

“Actually, it's your snake he doesn't trust,” she said, watching Hecuba pour the bowl of herbs into the cauldron and light three of the nine candles on the altar.

“Princess? Why? I thought snakes had a positive rep in native theology.”

“Well, it stems from a dream I had.” She glared down at Gaganan. “And yes, I am going to tell her.” She then related the dream she had of the horse and the snake while a very earthy scent began to permeate the room.

Hecuba nodded. “He could be right, you know. About me being the snake. I do tend more towards the viperish personality, and I have a constrictor.”

“But you and the black...”

She laughed, began stirring the mixture with a silver spoon counter-clockwise. “Black absorbs everything, so it never penetrates to me. I wear it like a shield. I do wear white for rituals though, or when I need to reflect everything away from myself. The colour of my underthings determines what gets past the black and into me.”

Nea heard the faint ‘tink’ of something hard being dropped into the cauldron.

“So,” Hecuba continued. “Can you speak with all animals? Or just that one?”

“All.”

“Really?” her eyebrows went up appreciatively. “What's Princess got to say?”

Nea looked over at the serpent who was still watching with interest. She shook her head. “Reptiles I don't get. Birds only so-so. Too close to reptiles, ironically enough.”

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Hecuba turned off the hot plate and began to pour the potion into the metal basin. “It’s ok. I get her moods pretty well. You’ll want to lay down on the rug on your back. Make yourself comfortable.”

Nea did as she was bid, smoothing her dress out beneath her legs. Hecuba set the three candles on the floor around her, one at her feet and the other two at ‘y’ points just out of arm’s reach at her head. She then bade Nea sit up and remove the towel from her hair and drape it around her shoulders.

Shaking a can of spray starch, she very carefully separated the silver lock and treated it on both sides with the starch. She took care to make sure every strand was covered. “Don’t worry, this is how I dye my own hair,” she grinned.

“I thought your hair was naturally black,” Nea frowned. “You don’t have that fake dyed look most Goth’s I’ve seen have.”

“And this is why. My hair is normally this atrocious, grungy brown. It’s not even an interesting brown. Now,” she continued, setting the can aside and put her hands on Nea’s shoulders. “You’ll want to lay back carefully and slowly. Don’t be surprised when you reach the bowl, you’re going to put your head in it.” She then gathered up Nea’s hair and fed it neatly into the water, holding her head as she got lower. “Going to be a bit warm...” she warned.

It was warmer than expected but Nea did not flinch. Her head fit comfortably in the basin. There must have been an indentation on the side for her neck. Gaganan sat on the bed watching guardedly, his eyes flickering all over the place, watching whatever spirits were present. *Smells like blackberry tea,* he chirred.

“It tingles a little,” she said.

“It’s working. Now shush, I have to concentrate.”

Hecuba used a silver ladle to spoon the liquid over the small bit of hair that was not in the water. She hummed to herself in a repetitive pattern as she wove her own brand of magic. After about five minutes, she stopped, told Nea to slowly raise up on her elbows, but to keep her head over the bowl.

Gaganan watched her hair unfold out of the basin like black spaghetti, focusing his eyes on the purplish-blue streak that had replaced the silver lock. He frowned.

Hecuba then began to pour cool water from the kettle over her hair, rinsing all traces of the herbs and their infusion. Then she wrung the water out and wrapped it in the towel draped over Nea’s shoulders. “Keep it wrapped up like that for about five minutes. Let the cool seep into your scalp.” She got up, carried the remains of the dye bath to the altar where she fished something out of it with silver tongs and set it on a white cloth. The dye bath she then set on the counter beside the snake tank. “I’ll pitch that in a little bit.”

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She collected the object and buffed it on the cloth, saying a few unintelligible words over it. Then, taking up Nea's right hand, she paused, held the object toward the cat to let him investigate. "Does this meet with your approval, sir?" she asked, no trace of sarcasm in her voice.

Gaganan checked it out thoroughly, spiritually as well as physically, chattered to something over his shoulder and then nodded.

Hecuba seemed almost surprised at the nod but placed the ring on Nea's right hand. "This," she said, "will hold the glamour, keep it strong for a while. Whatever you do," she grinned, "don't use the snapdragon soap."

Nea gave a rueful laugh. "I think I'll be pitching it."

"No!" she cried. "Keep it. You never know when you may need something like that. In fact, I wouldn't mind some of it. Just don't use it on your hair or your hands while you are wearing the ring. I'll make you some of my shampoo this weekend. It'll help hold the glamour longer. Though I'll warn you, under moonlight that lock will refract like silver no matter what I do."

She looked down at the strand of silver on her finger. It looked like a single long-stemmed rose had been twisted into a ring. "That is beautiful. Are you sure you want to give me this?"

She shrugged. "It's just a ring, hon. It's the magic it's imbued with that makes it special. Consider it a birthday present. ...A decent one," she grinned, "from your littlest fairy godmother. You know, the one that alters the spell the wicked fairy casts?"

Nea was passingly familiar with the tale and smiled. "But why would you want to give me a birthday present? We haven't said two words to each other since that first day."

"You and Jenny did me a big favour. She told me it was as much your idea as hers to trade rooms. And from what I've seen Handsome couldn't handle that hyper weasel. He's just too old," she said, reaching up to give the animal a comforting rub. "But as to why: we are both magic. A rare thing in this world. We have to take care of one another. I haven't found a coven here yet, or any like-minded individuals to practice with. Jenny accepts it, but she isn't into it. I don't know if our magic is compatible, but they don't run contrary and having someone I can talk 'shop' with once in a while is nice."

She checked her watch. "Oh, you can take the towel down now. I am late for Creative Interpretation," she said, picking up the candles and setting them back in their places before blowing them out.

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Nea got up quickly, unwrapping her hair and fingering the raven-wing black strand that blended into the others so perfectly. “Wow. That’s amazing.”

“Just keep the ring on and it’ll stay that way. The charm should last until at least March, but you can use the breaker soap and have Meme redo it if you are more comfortable with your own people’s magic,” Hecuba said, making sure everything was off and nothing was in danger of setting anything alight before closing the curtains.

Nea headed for the door, picking up her things and stopped, turned. “Oh, I... I am holding a pipe ceremony this evening, to celebrate my eighteenth birthday. Would you come?”

Hecuba seemed as startled by the invitation as Gaganan who was half on, half off the bed. He at least had been warned it was coming. He glanced over his shoulder and sighed, yielding to a voice only he could hear, then walked to the door. Hecuba was unsure what to say. “I... I would love to. I wouldn’t know... what to wear or bring.... I’m not one of those Goths that smoke cigarettes or cloves but... I understand the concept of the ritual.”

“Just bring yourself,” she smiled.

“Where? When?”

Nea frowned now. “I’m not sure yet. I’m certain smoking in the dorms isn’t allowed, and I’d want a place a little more cleansed. I haven’t found the right spot yet. Been thinking about the roof, but it’d be a bit cold up there.”

Hecuba suddenly smiled. “I know just the place. Meet me in front of the Arts Building at 7:45. I’ll take you. Bring whatever you’ll need.”

“All right then, 7:45,” she agreed and headed down the hall to put her things away and grab her books.

Gaganan sulked all the way to the room. *I still do not understand why she has to come.*

She waited until they were in the room before answering. “Because she performed for us a shaman’s act. She gave me of herself, worked magic for me. Tradition dictates I pay her in tobacco.”



Julia was less than thrilled when she found out that Hecuba was going to come as well. Nea spent the better part of an hour trying to explain why without saying exactly why. She liked Julia, but she was not a magical person, and she did not know

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how she would take it, or if she would understand the need for secrecy.

By the time they were walking back from the one class they had together, along with about eighty other students, Julia was less leery of the whole 'Hecuba' situation. She decided to just roll with it. They entered through the front door, still talking, and headed for the stairs when the young man behind the desk in the lobby leaned halfway out of his booth and called for them to stop. "Hey, wait!"

They turned.

"You Majeeway?"

She came back down the steps to the office window, looking at him warily as he wiggled back off the counter. "Yes."

"Whew! Been asking every exotic-looking, black-haired chick who's come through here since lunch," he sighed. "Sorry," he added when she glared at him. "I just guessed from the name. It looked exotic, Hindi or Oriental."

"Read non-Caucasian," Julia growled.

He set a vase with a bouquet of red, long-stemmed roses on it. "These then would be for you," he said. He pushed a clipboard her way. "Sign please."

Nea signed while Julia admired the arrangement. Julia found the card nestled in the greenery and pulled it out. "It says Happy Birthday," she said, handing it to Nea. She opened it, read the impeccably neat, spider-thin handwriting in red ink.

Breathless from afar,
weakened by desire,
a kind word from your lips,
a prelude to a kiss.

A Secret Admirer"

"What do you make of it?" Nea asked, handing it to Julia and taking a sniff of the roses. Their fragrance was faint at best. "Who delivered them?"

The young man shrugged. "Delivery guy from the florist. All he did was hand me this note," he said showing her a sticky note which read simply: Sooneawa Majiwe, Randall Hall.

Julia shrugged. "Not a brilliant poet, but pretty enough words." Her eyes lit up as Nea picked up the vase and headed upstairs. "You think it might be that guy from the Green? The one you 'tangled' with in the trees?"

"Maybe," she mused, "but I didn't tell him my name. I don't even know his."

"He could have asked around. There are ways you know. If you were interested you could be out looking for him. Ask around yourself? I mean how many dorms are there?"

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Nea let Julia unlock the door. “I think a description of him would fit a large number of people on campus. Lean, dark-haired, slightly curly, boyishly handsome.”

“But those eyes aren’t that common,” she protested, still trying to play matchmaker.

Nea put the roses on the window sill. “What colour were the eyes of that guy in the office?”

Julia froze, wracked her brains. She finally shrugged. “Ok, point made.”

“You have to admit, I’m far more unique and easier to track down. How many First Nations students are there on campus?”

About three, said Gaganan sauntering into the open door. *What’s with the roses?*

She turned, almost spoke to him in front of Julia but stopped herself. He hopped up onto the counter and began sniffing the flowers. *Nothing here but florist,* he grumbled.

Julia grabbed a can of soup. “What’ll it be? Cream of broccoli or vegetable beef.”

Gaganan and Nea answered together “*Vegetable Beef.*”



Julia gave Nea her birthday present just after dinner, as she was pulling her own new mukluks out of their bag. Nea was thrilled to no end and put the necklace on immediately.

Gaganan nodded his approval. *Inspired choice.*

“Where did you get this?”

Julia shrugged, trading her old cowboy boots for the warmer, softer mukluks. “Same place I got these. There’s a little First Nation run craft store in Clarkstown. They’ve got herbs and stuff there too: braids of sweetgrass, smudge bundles, stuff like that. I did some exploring today.”

“This is beautiful, Julia. And you have no idea what it means to me.”

She grinned, “Oh, I have an *idea*. Kinda like giving a Catholic a medallion of their patron saint?”

Nea laughed, admiring it in the mirror. “Something like that. We’d better hurry if we’re going to get to the arts building in fifteen minutes.” She took down her pipe and wrapped it in the deerskin, tying the tobacco pouch to her belt. As Julia grabbed her coat and Nea threw on her moose-hide cloak she looked back at Gaganan. “You coming?”

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Gaganan lay curled up on her pillow washing his face from dinner. *Nope.*

Out in the hall, they heard the all too familiar shout of “Baxter!” and “Somebody catch that rabbit!”

Julia opened the door and stepped out just in time to be rammed by the tan and white bullet. She caught him up and stepped outside.

“I got him. I’ll meet you at the stairs,” she said, closing the door behind her and taking the rabbit down to his owner.

“Gaganan, why?” she asked him. “Is it because of Hecuba?”

No, he answered petulantly as if holding a grudge was beneath him. *Because, I am not allowed to go. This is a spiritual thing that you have to figure out on your own, without your ‘spirit interpreter’.*

Nea felt suddenly cold inside. “But you’ve never missed a ceremony. Not even ones normal animals aren’t allowed to attend.”

He tipped his head in a feline shrug. *Raven said no. Which does not mean I won’t be sending something to watch over you. I will. Now go, or you’ll be late. By the way, I’m still not comfortable with the whole Hecuba thing, but... Raven said it’s ok. She’s actually part of your journey, on the Red Road. I can’t really tell you more, but... be well. Oh,* he added as she bent to rub cheeks, *and Raven said to be sure to leave a pinch of tobacco at the base of the white beech.*

I will, she purred and hurried out the door to catch up with Julia.



The two of them were not the only students out and about on campus that evening. People were coming back from dinner or classes or rushing off to dinner from class, hoping to get in before the line closed. By the time they arrived at the art’s building, Hecuba was already waiting beneath the streetlamp. She cut an impressive figure in a black velvet cloak, and fell into step with them immediately.

“Sorry we’re late. Baxter made a break for it ag’in,” Julia sighed. Nea could sense some definite tension between the two, but although Hecuba had not been told Julia was coming, it did not seem to surprise her.

She nodded. Everyone on the floor knew Baxter the escape artist by now. “That place I mentioned is a little bit of a walk, but well worth it. We won’t be disturbed.”

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Nea noticed as her cloak billowed open as she walked, that Hecuba was wearing earthy tones, instead of her usual black. “For getting in touch with the earth?” she asked.

Hecuba smiled. Even her lipstick was russet. “Made sense,” and she began to lead them westward off campus. “It’s not far, but it’s beautiful. I found it my first week. I come out here to practice.” She glanced back at Julia when she said that but did not register any recognition of her true meaning. “It is peaceful.”

Five minutes later they emerged from a copse of woods to stand beside a small lake with the reflection of a full moon glinting dark gold off its glassy surface. All three stood in silence, taking in the cold beauty. After a still moment, she led them along the shore a handful of yards to an indentation of the trees and began to gather twigs, leaves and fallen branches to start a fire in the well-used pit. Hecuba had made a fire ring of stones and partly dug out a safe place for a campfire. The trees curled slightly west of the pit, protecting it from the brunt of any Chinook gusts that might come up suddenly. With three of them working at it, they soon had a merry fire going.

Hecuba openly admired the pipe when it was unwrapped, though she tried not to. “Your customs don’t dictate you have to give me that if I say that is a breathtaking piece of artwork, does it?”

Nea laughed. “No, they don’t. Though I seem to remember there are some tribes that do hold to that, I just can’t remember which. And thank you. It was my father’s.”

They watched her in silent respect while she filled the bowl with the tobacco, taking care to offer a pinch to each of the four directions and oddly, to the large white beech tree behind her. Lighting it with a twig from the fire she again offered the smoke to the four winds, saying an old prayer she had been taught by her grandmother, a song to the mountain for which she was named. Then she began by passing the pipe first to Julia who sat to her right.

Julia took a puff or two and started coughing, held the pipe back to Nea who smiled as she accepted it. She realized Julia must have done more than buy mukluks and a necklace at that craft store. She took another puff of her own and passed it to Hecuba. She drew thrice on the stem, exhaling each with calm and reverence and then, with a tiny glance in askance at Nea, offered it to Julia.

Julia looked like she was going to refuse it at first, not sure if she wanted any more, but she accepted the pipe and grimaced as she went to draw on it again.

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“Think of it like a straw, like something you’d drink rather than breathe,” Hecuba advised. “Instead of swallowing, let it go, but be at peace with it.”

She took her advice, still coughing, but not so much the second time. She followed Hecuba’s example and took a third draw before passing it on to Nea. “Easier if you’re used to it, huh?” Julia asked her.

Nea grinned, holding the pipe stem thoughtfully at her lip. “I thought you said you didn’t smoke.”

“I said I don’t. Never said I *didn’t*. Let’s just say I stumbled down the wrong path a while before I found the right one,” she answered enigmatically.

Nea smiled as she took a long puff, smoking thoughtfully as she watched the fire crackle between them.

“It’s whoever wants it now, right?” Julia asked hesitantly.

Nea nodded. “What another try?”

“Yeah,” she said with determination. “I think I git it now.”

Nea handed it to her and shrugged out of her cloak. Hecuba followed suit.

Julia screwed up both concentration and courage and drew a deeper breath. The first one came out fine. Encouraged, she tried to blow the next one out her nose and howled as she passed it to Hecuba. “Oh! That burns.”

They all laughed. When Julia could breathe again she noticed the two of them had taken off their coats, both were wearing dresses and neither was sitting as close to the fire as she was. “Aren’t y’all freezin? Wearin’ dresses in this cold? It’s got to be like twenny-degrees out here!” she shivered, holding her hands out to the fire.

The two dark-haired girls laughed. “No, it’s only about eight... Celsius,” Nea said. “She’s from Georgia,” she explained.

“What’s that in Fahrenheit?” Julia moaned.

“About forty or so,” Hecuba said.

“Don’t feel it. You Canadian too?” she asked, beginning to feel very left out of the ‘crowd’.

“Nope.”

“Where?” Nea asked, curious herself as she took her turn on the pipe.

Hecuba shook her head. “You’ll laugh.”

Her eyes danced. “Only if it’s appropriate.”

She looked over at Nea, trying to judge the comment. Finally, she said. “Salem, Massachusetts.”

Nea did chuckle, but then, so did Hecuba. “How ironic.”

The Speaker

“Yeah, no kiddin’,” giggled Julia, finally getting it. “Ya do have that ‘witchy’ look to ya.”

The other two tried to resist the outburst of mirth. Hecuba gained control of herself first as a very sobering thought came to her. “That a problem for you?” she asked.

Even Nea stopped laughing. Julia looked from one to the other, not certain what was going on. Suddenly it struck her. “Now, I don’t truck with no demon worship stuff. I’m Southern Baptist. Not a good one mind ya, but fair enough.”

“True witchcraft is not demon worship,” Hecuba said, her voice once more cool and distant. “Do you have a problem with Nea’s faith?”

“Well, no. She believes in God, an all present spirit. Practice is just differnt. I think in a lot of ways hers are more revrent. But I’ll stick with what I know though.”

Hecuba took a deep breath, softened her tone a little. “True Crafters abhor demons and demonology. If we undertake to study that sort of thing it is only to know the enemy and protect ourselves from it. The Green Way and the Native Way are very similar in concept if they differ a bit in practice and symbology. I know because my cousin married a Dakota. I know because I am a Green Witch.”

Julia looked subdued, almost as if she had been duped into a demonic ritual. Nea, still holding the pipe stem to her teeth looked from one girl to the other. “What ...exactly ...is a green witch? Y’all mean like the Wizard of Oz an’ all?”

Hecuba gave a snort of laughter at the guileless ignorance. “No. We work with the earth and its natural forces. Potions, lotions and notions, as my Gran used to say.”

“But you don’t force your will on others with your brews, like love potions and all?”

She rolled her eyes. “That would be the arena of a Charmer. A warlock who works his will on others. Yes, I do make things to attract love, but they are to *attract* love, the right person for each individual. They do not force love where love does not bide. We have three rules: Do Not Interfere With Free Will. Do No Magic For Frivolous Reasons. And most importantly: Do No Harm. Anything we do unto others is visited back on us three-fold. So we are careful what we do.” She held up her hands, displaying silver rings on at least three fingers on each hand. “I bind my hands with silver to keep me from harming anyone. Especially in my sleep.”

“That’s... wow. Unbelievable.”

The Speaker

“Magic is like faith,” Nea said, passing the pipe. “You just have to trust that it is there. It is all part of the Great Mystery.”

“Speaking of being ‘there,’” Hecuba said, narrowing her eyes. “Something is in that tree watching us.”

They all looked up into the darkened branches of the white beech. Julia claimed she saw nothing but could feel ‘eyes on the back of her neck’. Nea thought she saw a glimmer that shouldn’t have been there. “Can you see it, Hecuba?” she asked.

“Mostly.”

“What’s it look like?” Julia breathed.

“Large, bird-like. Black.”

“Benign or hostile?” Nea said.

“Benign... I think. Wary and alert for certain.”

She nodded, turned back to the fire. “Gaganan sent him. It’s probably a raven spirit sent to keep an eye on me.”

They relaxed, but the event opened up a whole new topic of conversation, about Gaganan and Nea’s gift, and the three girls spent hours talking and laughing until the fire began to die. Hecuba looked up at the moon and began to smother the fire with the dirt on the edges of it. “It’s nearly midnight,” she said. “We should go. I for one have an early class.”

They walked back to the hall in peaceful silence, touched and filled with the evening’s events and a new sense of oneness between them. Crossing the Green it began to snow.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Closing the Year

The term closed peacefully for most people. The results of the Randall/Belmont project were currently fifteen percent higher in favour of Randall Hall and Moorland decided to throw a Christmas party in the basement in spite of the project directors. This, of course, forced them to throw one at Belmont as well.

Amid all the carolling and celebrations, Nea had a visit with her student advisor, which did not go as she had hoped. While she was assured that her grades continued to be high enough for entrance to the Veterinary medicine graduate program, she was urged to choose a major she could fall back on, should things 'not work out'. With enough credit hours under her belt already to qualify as a sophomore the next term, she would need to complete what they referred to as a 'liberal arts' degree by the end of the summer term. Choosing a major now would help streamline her courses to double for the Vet degree. She didn't really see a problem with this.

She scanned the list and chose Wildlife Management almost at once, knowing that should something untoward happen, Native specialists in Wildlife Management were in high demand back home.

The trouble came when she was informed she would have to choose a science credit that was not medically related. 'Part of the diversity of a liberal program,' she was told. 'To provide for a more well-rounded, pre-graduate education.' She was still

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fuming about it to Julia on the way back to the dorm after lunch at the cafeteria.

“Can you believe it? Then she said that if I wanted a streamlined, all or nothing degree I should have gone to a technical school instead of a university,” she railed, waving the next term’s course list furiously.

“Hey, I have t’ put up with the art Nazi claimin’ that digital media is only good fer advertisin’ an’ graphic design,” Julia countered, then broadly grinned. “So I declared a double major. Ya should ha’ seen the look on his face. But hey, what’s one class?” she shrugged.

“It’s a waste of time and money.”

“So choose something fun,” she shrugged. “Uh oh, bunny alert,” she announced as they reached the third-floor staircase.

Both girls made a dive for the rabbit, dropping everything in the process. Julia snagged him, but it wiggled free and right into Nea’s clutches. She seized prompt hold of its scruff and held it out from her as it kicked desperately. *Oh pleeeeeease!* it begged, trying desperately to get loose. *I gotta have him! Not again, so close, so near to relief and blissful momminess!*

Her eyebrow arched as she listened. She held the bunny up to eye level and raised a finger to her lips. *Shhh,* she told it. *Stop kicking and tell me all about it. Where are you going in such a hurry?*

The rabbit hung limp in her grasp, a little shocked at being understood. Nea then held her close against her shoulder, cuddling her more comfortably.

Well, Baxter began, *I’m in heat, and... there’s a buck near somewhere and... I want him... I *need* him! It’s ooooh so frustrating. Every month: no relief, no kits.*

Nea soothed her with quiet tones. *I’ll see what I can do.*

He’s so cute too; fluffy little scut and warmest brown eyes.

Nea laughed softly. Julia nodded and gathered up the things they had dropped. Nea walked down to the room across from theirs and knocked on the door. Julia opened their door and dropped everything on her own bed and headed back out to watch.

No one answered the door. They were just deciding what they should do when they heard a shout from the direction of the bathrooms. “What are you doing with my rabbit?”

They turned. “Made a break for the stairs. Must have got out when you went to the bathroom,” Nea explained.

The girl took the rabbit, who gave Nea a pleading look, and held her up to her face, scolding her. “Baxter, you bad boy. Why do you keep doing this?”

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Nea tried to hide an embarrassed grin. “Um, first of all, that’s a doe, not a buck.”

She held the bunny close and frowned at the two of them. “What are you talking about? It’s a rabbit, not a deer.”

“Hon,” Julia retorted. “Boy rabbits are called bucks. Girl rabbits are called does.”

“Oh, well, Baxter’s a...”

“Girl,” Nea finished. “And... I believe she’s in heat and has the hots for a buck down the other hall.”

The girl was flabbergasted. “What? How do you know?”

Julia piped up again. “She’s in Vet school,” she said as if stating the obvious.

“But...” she lifted the bunny, checking under her tail. “How can you tell?”

“There’s a difference,” Nea flushed.

“But how could he know there’s another rabbit down there. He... *she’s* never been down that hall.”

Nea tapped her nose. She reached out and rubbed her fur. “I’d either get her fixed over the holidays or let her have a litter. It’s a lot on their system to go into heat and not get anything.”

“Think getting all hot and heavy and never reaching your peak... every month,” said Julia with a wicked grin.

Excuse me, muttered Gaganan, pushing past Julia who was blocking the door and streaking down the hall to the bathroom.

The girl started apologizing to the rabbit immediately, sympathizing with her as she went down the hall searching for the ‘other rabbit’.

A moment later Hecuba came out of the bathroom looking startled, walked down to Nea and Julia. “You didn’t tell me he was toilet-trained. Though it doesn’t surprise me in the least.”

Nea smirked. “He can read, too. Though not at the same time.”

Julia choked.

“When one speaks a common tongue, it is amazing what you can teach one another,” Nea responded with a raised brow.

“Oh, right,” she said weakly, getting her breath back. “You flyin’ home fer Christmas, Hec? Excuse me, *Yule?*”

The girl smiled. “Yes. I am. You?”

Julia shook her head. “Nah, flyin’ t’ Texas. Meetin’ m’ folks at m’ uncle’s. We Christmas at his place every year. So, we’ll be on the same bus down t’ Calgary.” Hecuba nodded, with less trepidation as she would have a month before. “I’ll make

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shore t' bring back a couple o' my mom's pecan pies."

Julia and Nea went into their room and Hecuba followed, though she stayed near the door searching warily for the ferret. "Nea, you gonna get some more o' that pemmican?" Julia asked.

"I can. What flavour would you like?"

"I liked the blueberry, but cran-apple would be fine if there isn't any."

"Hecuba? What about you? What flavour would you like?"

She thought a moment. "Blackberry... if you have it. If not, do not worry for me. I too have Yule gifts, but I would give mine before you leave," she said, eyeing the curriculum sheets that Julia was handing Nea.

"Those are yours, I think," Julia said. "Huh? Oh, ya don't have ta... Where'd Hecuba go?"

Nea looked up. Hecuba was already gone, but Gaganan was trotting into the room looking a little drained.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

Not really. Oooo, my tummy.

"I told you that drinking too much of what they pass off as milk around here wasn't good for you. And I'm sure all the frosting you scarfed off my cake at the party isn't helping."

Julia giggled. "Yeah, that was a pretty nekkid looking piece a cake."

So, I like sugar, he humphed. *But it wasn't that, it was the... eggnog."

She looked at Julia. "He drank eggnog?"

Julia looked up from fighting to pull her suitcase out of the closet. "Huh? I guess. I wasn't watching him."

"Yes. He consumed mass quantities from any glass left unattended," announced Hecuba from the door again, now wearing elbow-length black gloves and holding an odd-shaped bottle tied with a ribbon. "It was virgin, no alcohol, so you needn't fret too much. Though I dare say no one will be using the bathroom on this floor anytime soon."

He lashed his tail with irritation. *Not all of it was fire-water free. But I avoided those. ...ah gorse bushes!* he exclaimed and darted out the door again.

Nea sighed, sitting down on the bed. "At least it'll be peaceful around here for a week or so."

"You aren't going home?" Hecuba asked, surprised.

"I want to, but... there's just not enough money. In fact, I'm going to work at the craft store in town over the holidays and save the money for later when I hit vet

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school proper. I won't be able to work *and* study then, and you never know when you need extra money. Besides, who knows what the experiment's out-come will be. They may not allow pets next year and I'll have to find an apartment."

"Don't sweat it. If it comes t' that, we'll both just live off my uncle," Julia grinned. "I'll have him get me an apartment. Shoot, knowin' him, he'd prob'ly buy a buildin'."

"Nice to have rich relatives," Hecuba said with a cool smile.

"Yea, it is, ain't it?" Julia beamed, her red pigtails bouncing as she began throwing things into her suitcase. "Now, I'm leavin' all Lulabelle's stuff in my closet." She suddenly dropped her voice as if afraid the ferret could understand her. "An' if she asks you fer her turtle toy, try an' distract her with something else. She tore his head half off yesterday and I had t' pitch 'im."

"I'll break the news gently," Nea smirked. The ferret was watching both of them from her cage, beady eyes alert, as if she knew they were talking about her.

"Speaking of the weasel," Hecuba said from the door. They turned. "This is for you, Julia. To wash her with. It may cut down on the oils which... I am allergic to. Maybe once that is out of the way... I can work on... getting over my fear of her."

This was the first either of them had heard of Hecuba being afraid of the ferret. Before either of them could make anything of the issue she crossed to Nea and took her coursebook from her. "And your gift..." She flipped through it, took a pen from the cup on the desk and circled something on it. She handed it back to Nea. "Whatever you do, make room in your schedule for that class."

Nea looked at it. "Introduction to Medical Anthropology? Why?"

Hecuba shrugged, closed the pen and put it back. "I don't know. But I dreamed ANT-1501 and symbols that could only mean you. Who am I to argue with the universe?"

"Thank you," she frowned staring at it, all the cosmic insinuations starting to fall together. Trouble was, there was no picture to it yet. "I was just told today I had to choose at least 3 hours worth of a non-med related science. This will be perfect."

"Really?" Julia mused. "But it's *medical* anthropology. How can it work?"

"It has an ANT prefix. That was one of my options. It was either one of those or Astronomy or one of the 'ographies," she said. She gave Hecuba a hug, something her friend didn't expect. "Thank you."

"You are most welcome," she answered. "You didn't want to take Astronomy anyway. It's a rotten course."

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Oh, I'm dying. Please ask her if she can make me a brew to settle my tummy, Gaganan groaned, leaning up against the door frame.

"I was beginning to wonder if you fell in," she smirked. "Next time don't be so greedy. Hecuba, do you know anything good for... you know?" she asked.

Hecuba smiled, almost maliciously. "Yeeess," she drawled. "I do."

Oh, spirits! The cure's gonna be worse than the ailment, he yowled. He thought a moment. *No, it can't be.*

"Go make yourself comfortable," Hecuba told him. "I'll be back in five minutes with something for you to drink."

Nea settled him on the pillow and made him comfortable. He lay there like a limp rag. "You gonna be all right?" she asked him. "Or do you want me to take you to a vet?"

Oooo, I'll try her remedy first. Nature first, quacks last.

"Quack?" She glared at him. "Is that what I'm going to be? A quack?"

Nooo, you understand us... you'll listen not guess... oooff. Don't ask me to make sense when I'm in agony, he groaned, covering his face with his paw. *...and tell that damned crow to shut his bill!* he growled, lashing his tail.

She leaned close to his face, purred in his ear. *What crow? Only you can hear him.*

Gaganan growled meaninglessly.

What is he telling you?

He seemed reluctant to say, but Nea coaxed it out of him. *He said it serves me right for my greed,* he yowled. *Pot calling kettle, you ask me. Said I'd live.*

Julia grimaced. "You shore you wanna rely on an herbal? Maybe he needs a vet."

Nea stroked his fur to settle him down. "No. He'll live. It's nothing more than a pasteurized milk hangover."

Cream, he corrected. *Glorious frothy cream. Sweet delectable...* his purred exaltation was interrupted by Hecuba's arrival. His ears went up at the smell.

"Sorry it took so long. It needed to cool," she said. She knelt on the floor by his head and held out a small bowl. "Drink up. It'll soothe your tummy and keep you from running in and out of the bathroom all day."

He rolled on his belly and tasted it, sat up and began lapping it up. *I taste honey and ... I'm not sure what but... oh this is good....*

"What is it?" Nea asked.

"Infusion of Catnip and Yarrow. See, I thought you'd like it."

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Julia looked at her watch and panicked, began throwing things in her bag willy nilly. “Darn it! The next shuttle to Clarkstown leaves in fifteen minutes. If I miss it, I’ll miss my bus to Calgary. Hecuba, you on it?”

She got up off the floor. “Yes. I, however, am packed.”

“Princess too?” Nea asked, giving both of them a hug of farewell. As she embraced Hecuba she felt something move between them. She looked down. Hecuba gave her a wicked smile, opened part of her blouse to reveal a bag hanging around her neck against her stomach.

“Princess, too.”

Julia hopped down to Lulabelle’s cage and said her goodbyes and Hecuba went to her room to collect her things. The two of them hurried along with Jenny and several others down to the shuttle stop at the entrance to the campus. Nea walked with them, listening to the excited chatter of students going home. Once the shuttle had driven off she went to the student union to use the phone.

Her call home was not overly long. She spoke to several people, Tuwe and Meme included, let them know the things she needed, how she was doing, to tell them about her new friends, especially about Hecuba and finding an actual wonder worker. She told them she would call back on Christmas.

It snowed on her walk back to the dorm. She took her time, enjoying the peace and quiet of the afternoon. Her path took her along the wall past the student parking lot, which was all but deserted. A single young man dressed in a black suit under an expensive black coat was laying a garment bag in the trunk of a sterling silver luxury car. His golden hair ruffled by the wind was a sharp contrast to the severe colours of his clothes. There was something about the chiselled face that drew her attention, something that pulled in an uncomfortable way.

The slam of the trunk echoed in the parking basin below her, disrupting the peace. As he opened the car door he paused, as if sensing her, and turned. Their eyes met and he smirked, before climbing into the car and driving away.

The brief, though distant, encounter left her feeling a little cold inside and Nea hurried back to her room to warm up and check on Gaganan. When she arrived, she found a small bud vase sitting in front of the door with a single blood-red rose in it. There was no one in the hallway. Even the RA had gone home for Christmas.

She picked up the vase and read the little note attached. “A Rose for Rosamund. Soon. Merry Christmas.”

Her grip went slack, the vase breaking on the floor. The door opened, Gaganan’s paw still holding the latch handle as he peered out in concern. He let go

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and opened it fully when he saw it was only her. *What?* he asked. He started to step out to comfort her but hesitated when the water touched his paws and he saw the glittering of broken glass.

From inside Nea could hear Lulabelle bouncing in her cage. *What? OOoo OOoo Lemme see! Let me out! Mommy? Speaker?*

Nea got her wits about her and handed Gaganan the note. She picked up what she could of the glass, dropping it and the rose in the trash can just inside the door. Stepping over it into the room she got the broom and began cleaning up.

When she was done, Gaganan looked up from the note on the bed in front of him. *You have to tell somebody.*

“Who am I going to tell?” she snapped.

A badge.

“Tell what?” asked a voice. Nea turned and saw the RA from the fourth floor walking a mournful looking, dark blonde rabbit with long ears.

“Oh, I thought everyone had gone,” Nea said.

“There are six people staying in this dorm over the holidays. Two on the men’s floors, one at the other end of this floor, and me and another girl upstairs. I’m the only RA until January. What happened?” she asked, pointing at the puddle of water Nea had not gotten up yet.

Nea showed her the note, explained what she had found.

The rabbit on the leash was investigating the door across the hall. He got excited for a moment, then moped again. *Found her, found her, gone though,* he sulked. *Doe, doe, dudododoe,* he muttered, tried to continue down the hall.

“This is kind of sweet, but... what’s the alarm? Fiver! Excuse me.” She reeled him in and picked him up. The rabbit immediately climbed to her shoulder, where he rested his head like a child would, nuzzling just under her ear. “What’s the problem with it? Other than how it got here?”

“The only people who know my middle name are my family. It’s not even on file in the registrar’s office. My roommate doesn’t even know.”

The RA’s attitude changed immediately. “Is it on your birth certificate?”

“Well, yes, it’s there, but... all my school records list just an initial.”

“You’re sure no one here knows this name?”

Nea nodded.

“Are there other Rosamunds on the floor? Maybe they got the wrong door.”

“Not on this side of it. It’s an unusual name.”

“I’ll check at the registrar’s office, just in case.” The RA looked in the trash can

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at the pieces. “Oh good, you emptied it before you put the vase in. I’ll get you another one. I’m going to take this and the note down to the campus police. They may want to interview you later. This is serious. One: it means that someone broke into confidential records to obtain this if they had to go to the copy of your birth cert to get it. Two: a man was on this floor, if one actually was. Whoever this is could have gotten one of the girls on the floor to deliver it for him.”

Nea shook her head. “I think everyone who was leaving was on their way out to the shuttles when I left, and it wasn’t there then.”

“Well, don’t you worry. I’ll get this straightened out. If you feel less than safe alone down here, feel free to come see me. I’m the last room on this side of the hall. My name is Martha.”

“Wait, you’re just above me?” she asked, shaking her hand.

“No, above across the hall, actually. Why?”

Nea laughed. “The vents,” she said. “Has he been acting weird since you got here?”

“Every so often, yeah. Why, what do you know?”

Nea explained about Baxter. The two girls had a laugh over it, with Martha promising to bring Fiver down for a visit once Baxter was back from vacation. She took Nea’s trash can with her when she left, warning her to keep her door locked at all times especially when she was home.



There were no other incidents, though every time she heard a strange noise in the hall, she would look out the peephole. That aside, the holiday passed quietly. Nea spent the time studying or working at the store and tending the two animals in her care. The shop owner’s daughter was thrilled to see Nea wearing her handiwork. Not very ‘crafty’ herself, Nea tended the register and the hordes of people who came in and out of the little store all the way up to closing on Christmas eve.

The store was closed Christmas day, and Nea and Gaganan had the day to themselves. They went to the student union and called the tribe when they were expected to. Most of them had gathered in the Education office and they put her on speakerphone. Few of her people who lived on the reservation proper owned phones of their own. Not out of poverty, but out of desire.

They talked nearly an hour before wishing a round of happy holidays and ringing off, and Nea walked away feeling a bit less lonely. The only person she did

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not get to speak with that she wanted to was Spider, but she hated the telephone and wouldn't come near it. The only way to reach her was in person... or perhaps a letter.

She wrote out a letter in Ojibwe, the only thing Spider spoke or read, though she understood English full well. She told her about the incident with the soap and her meeting with Hecuba and everything that had spawned from it, asking ... she wasn't sure what she was asking. But then one never really needed to ask Spider anything. Because even if you asked her a question whose answer was a cardinal direction you rarely got an answer to it. What Spider had to tell you, you needed to know, even if it made no sense at the time. She enclosed at least a pipe bowl worth of tobacco from the hip pouch she almost always carried with her and folded that carefully into the letter.

When she went to the post office to mail it, she found a package waiting for her, a parcel that had gotten misplaced. In it were her Christmas presents. They were mostly necessary things: a rabbit fur quilt from Seven Trees, more botanicals from Cold Heart, tins of pemmican from Elk Whistle, a banded owl feather from Spider. Other families sent more personal gifts: dream webs, a medicine wheel with wooden animals adorning it, a beaded bracelet. There was even a fur toy for Gaganan.

The chief had given her the journal of an old horse doctor who had lived in the hills which entailed folk remedies and what he referred to as 'baling wire diagnostics': the art of diagnosing without expensive tests or equipment. The old doctor did not eschew all modern practices, on the contrary. But in emergency situations where one had to decide which course of action to take, these little methods of eliminating one disease over another had saved more than a few lives.

Thankfully, when she returned to the dorm, there were no more unexpected presents at her door. The police had spoken with her, full of concern, but since she had only received one other anonymous thing, they could not establish a pattern of stalking. There had been no trace of fingerprints on the vase or card other than hers and the RA's, ...and cat teeth... so that had been no help. They filed their report with the town police and nothing more had been done. Martha had taken to setting up a coffee urn in the lobby for whoever needed it and as a result, the security guard stopped by a little more often than he used to do.

When she opened the door to her room Gaganan looked up from the bed where he was playing with Lulabelle. The ferret peered out from under the blanket's edge and looked up expectantly. *Food?*

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“Not now.”

Oh, fur! Gaganan purred, sticking his head in the box the moment she set it down. *That’ll be nice and warm tonight.*

Nea showed him his toy, then tossed it across the floor. Both animals charged after it. This kept them distracted while she put away her new things, setting the tin of cran-apple pemmican on Julia’s pillow, and the rest of them on the shelf. She was taking out the can opener to open a can of soup when Gaganan stopped her. *Oh yeah, the woman upstairs with the rabbit... Christmas dinner. Fourth-floor kitchen. Whole dorm. Boys too...* he grinned.

“How do you know?” she asked, putting the can back.

Slipped a note under the door.

“Where is it?”

Lulabelle made herself scarce suddenly. Gaganan lashed his tail, though he spoke calmly. *I was reading it when the lunatic decided it was something to play with. She shredded it before I could get it back from her. It is frustrating to live with her without an interpreter around. She just doesn’t know the difference between playing and ‘I’m going to rip your empty head off your wet noodle body if you don’t give that back’.*

Nea laughed, began to make herself more party-friendly. She changed into a dress and her mocs, brushed out her hair and headed for the door.

We are invited too, you know, he said, clearing his throat.

“Well, come on then.”

One. Brush. I’ve been on the floor tussling with the lunatic.

Nea got out his brush and began grooming him. “And I assume there’s a two?”

You put the leash on the lunatic.

“Right,” she nodded. Truth be told, she hadn’t thought about taking the ferret. She borrowed a broad red ribbon from Julia’s desk and tied it around Gaganan’s neck like a bow tie. Seeing this, Lulabelle insisted on something too, so she got one of those elastic hair bands with little red heart beads on it and slipped that on, making sure it wasn’t tight and the ferret could slip out of it if she got hung up on anything.

Together they went upstairs to the party to enjoy the evening. Martha had gone all out, baked a small ham, dressing, the pies. There were even treats for the animals which consisted of a female border collie, a lorry in her cage, Fiver and a female Ragdoll who was sitting in the window batting at snowflakes. Gaganan spent a long while sitting with her and enjoying feline company.

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About halfway through the party, he appeared at Nea's side and sat up, setting his paws on her shoulder to get her attention. She stroked his head and fed him a scrap of the ham, half closing her eyes at him. He accepted the ham, but told her *I have to go outside. I'll... I'll be back.*

All right, she purred, unable to ask him any more without arousing suspicions. He seemed a little agitated.

He started for the door, then thought better of it, turned back, *Maybe I should take another piece with me.*

She laughed and gave it to him. "One for the road, huh?"

He trotted out the kitchen door with only a muffled, *Not exactly.*

"Man, that is a huge cat!" one of the two boys commented, helping himself to a second slice of pie. "He's bigger than my dog!"

"What was with the half-blinking you two were doing?" asked the girl from the other end of her floor who owned the Ragdoll. "I noticed whenever you did it, he did it too."

"It is a feline way of saying 'I love you'. That and rolling on their backs is a way of saying 'I trust you', which to them is almost the same thing."

Nea spent an enjoyable evening, which was more than could be said for poor Gaganan. When Nea returned to her room rather late, he was curled up in front of the door looking very unhappy about something. He was still a little damp from the snow, so Nea brought him in at once and dried him off, wrapped him in the warm fur of their new blanket. Whatever was bothering him, he refused to speak of it to her. Eventually she fell asleep trying to coax it out of him. The last thing she heard as she drifted off was his rough growl to no one visible, *I still don't see why it has to be this way. It's just not fair to her.* When she showed signs of stirring to ask, he began to lick her forehead, purring her back to sleep.

CHAPTER SIX:

Opening the Door

By the second of January students were already returning to campus. Nea had registered for all her classes and had her schedule in hand by the time most of them were scrambling to register. She was already perusing through her books. She had worked until the first of the year for the craft store, when they could no longer justify her salary. She bowed out graciously, thanking them for what little work they could give her. They promised to call her when business picked up again and they needed an extra hand.

Hecuba arrived on the third, and Nea showed up at her door as soon as Gaganan told her she had arrived. She handed her the tin of blackberry pemmican and the stuff her aunt had sent her. “The pemmican is yours. But my aunt sent me more stuff and... after last time... I was wondering if you would check it for me?”

“Sure,” she said, bringing Nea inside while she put Princess back into her tank. “It’ll take a few days though.”

“Thanks. There is no telling what my aunt has up her sleeve. She doesn’t want me here. Of course, she doesn’t really want me at home, either.”

“That’s a new feather,” Hecuba commented, noticing the barred owl feather next to the raven feather on Nea’s braid wrap.

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Nea smiled, fingering the silent edge of it. “Yes. It was a present from one of the tribal elders. Our... shaman I guess you could call her. She’s strong medicine.”

Hecuba paused on the way to her suitcase. “Oh? What kind of feather?”

“Owl.”

She nodded sagely, turned back to unpacking. “Wisdom. That is a good gift.”

“Actually,” Nea said, sliding open the wardrobe for her, “to our tribe it symbolizes deception and the darker magic of the world. Depending on how it comes to you, it can be protection, a way to remove it, or a warning that you are dabbling too deeply in things best left in the dark.”

Hecuba hung up what she had in her hands and turned, taking Nea by the shoulders. “Then listen to it. Keep it with you to remind you to be on the watch. You are not dabbling, yes?” “Of course not. I’m not a wielder and my main concern right now is finishing school.”

“Then it is a warning or a protection. Your aunt may have been misguided when she sent you disenchanting shampoo, but maybe she knew something else. Be on your guard.”

Out in the hall, Nea suddenly heard a familiar chanting of *Doe doe dedohdohdoe, de doe dedoe DOE!* followed by the all too familiar shouts of “Baxter Bunny, get back here!”

She grinned broadly and pulled Hecuba out into the hall to watch.

The two rabbits were stopped nose to nose in the middle of the hallway, one on his leash, the other free roaming, sniffing each other in eager contentment. Fiver began licking Baxter’s face, at which, the smaller bunny heaved a happy sigh. *Buck.* Baxter’s owner was standing a few feet behind the two rabbits, open mouthed and dumb-founded.

Martha smiled meekly. “When he started going nuts a little while ago, I assumed she was back in the building.”

“But... I looked for you guys,” Baxter’s owner choked. “Went from door to door on this floor looking for another rabbit.”

“I’m on the fourth floor, right above you.”

Baxter’s owner glared at Nea. “You said he was down the hall!”

Nea shrugged. “I said I thought he might be. I was wrong. The smells were coming through the vents, of which you and Martha share ducts.” She stepped in between the two owners and took a more official stance. “Do you, owner of the buck Fiver consent to the union of these two very contented Leporidae?”

Martha nodded. “He gets lonely during the day.”

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“And you, owner of the doe Baxter Bunny consent to the possibly fruitful union of these two love bunnies and promise to find loving, appropriate homes for the eventual results?”

She had to think about this for a few. She watched the two very happy rabbits cuddling, Baxter looking up at her with pleading eyes. Finally her roommate piped up, “You can get her spayed with the money from the bunnies,” she suggested.

That cinched it. “All right, one litter, but after that I’m getting her fixed.”

“Then it’s settled,” Nea said and the two girls headed up to the fourth floor to make ‘bunny-sitting’ arrangements.

Julia arrived as Hecuba and Nea were standing in the hall comparing their schedules and joined the conversation. Since Nea would no longer be taking any freshmen courses, she and Julia had no classes in common, though Julia had a few with Hecuba. Schedules being what they were, Julia and Nea would no longer be having lunch together. Nea was going to be spending more evenings in class, while Julia’s classes were mostly in the morning and afternoon. The three of them decided that they would all go down and have dinner together in the cafeteria to catch up on the holidays. Which reminded Julia... she had two pecan pies to deliver.

The cafeteria was serving what it supposed was a traditional First Nation dinner. There was succotash, maple salmon, fry bread, acorn squash soup and pumpkin pie. There were other alternative offerings as well, for the less adventurous, including the ever present salad bar. The three of them went for the native dishes, except for Hecuba who swapped the salmon for roast chicken. When Julia asked why she had replied rather enigmatically: “Today is not a ‘fish’ day for me.”

Julia nodded, ‘Oh’ing as if she understood it was a mystical religious thing.

Hecuba laughed, reaching for the salt. “Actually, I don’t eat any fish, especially salmon, that is not prepared by someone I know and trust. It’s never the same and questionably safe.”

Julia laughed good naturedly at the joke when she realized it. “Must be a slice of home,” she commented to Nea.

Nea pushed the soup away after one bite. “Ugh. Well, some of this I’m not familiar with. Succotash is a Southern tribe dish, though I do like it. The only thing I *am* familiar with is the maple salmon, though Tuwe’s mom makes it best. It’s nice that they’ve made the effort though.”

Hecuba picked at her chicken with her neatly manicured nails. “You don’t eat dinner here often do you?” she grinned.

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She and Julia shook their heads. “Schedules didn’t allow for much but lunch out here,” said Julia. “We made our own suppers last term.”

“They do this every Tuesday. They choose a country or a food theme and make a big deal out of it. It gets packed when they do Italian. Though I’ll advise you to stay away from the red sauces. It’s that canned garbage and thus unpalatable. But they have a mean lasagna Florentine,” she said, waving her salad fork.

From behind them in the line they heard a group of boys complaining about the menu rather loudly and rudely. “I wish they’d give up on this foreign slop day,” growled a tall red-headed boy.

“I know. My stomach can’t take it,” moaned a darker haired, portly young man.

The striking blonde next to him replied, “It is only to make the foreign students feel like they are welcome. Which of course they’re not. The university is trying to give the appearance of an ethnically diverse student body. The filth are only here to fill some stupid governmental quota.”

“Some of them are so poor the school had to pay them to come here,” the heavy-set one offered.

There was a loud crash from the kitchen as someone dropped something. No one heard Nea’s chair move back in the din. Julia reached to stop her, but Hecuba’s hand shot out, intercepting.

“No, thank you,” said the red-head with a curled lip. “I’ll take the *American* food, if you don’t mind,” pointing out what he wanted.

The first of them swiped their cards for the cashier and turned to find Nea standing in their way, arms folded over her chest. When the blonde turned, she recognized him instantly as the boy from the parking lot. He went slightly pale under his salon tan.

“Excuse me, Pocahontas,” grunted the redhead, who was swiftly kicked by the blonde.

“Only here to fill a quota?” Nea said. Her voice echoed in the suddenly still cafeteria. People had turned to see what the hold up in the line was, and even the serving staff was watching, succotash spoons suspended, kitchen help peering in from the back.

“Um, what my portly friend meant was,” said the blonde quickly in his smooth as silk voice.

Nea cut him off. “You know, I don’t care what *you* meant,” she said, her tone deceptively calm. Her manner was cool, but there was fire blazing behind her golden brown eyes. “I don’t even care how I managed to get in. If a quota was the

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only way, fine. I know I deserved it. My people know I deserved it. And before the next five years are over, everyone on this campus is going to know it. I need this, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let a few bigoted buffalo humps like yourselves keep me from making the most of it."

The cafeteria erupted in applause and cheers, though Hecuba noticed it did not include everyone. She looked the trio over carefully. The red head and the short one were inconsequential, but the blonde's eyes flashed, whether in admiration or rage, she wasn't sure. Possibly both.

Nea took another step closer, began to peer at the contents of their trays. "Hmm, let's see what *American* foods you chose, shall we? Ah, the Hot Dog."

The red-head stood straighter and smirked, an expression she quickly wiped from his face. "German," she snapped. "Though an American did put it on a bun. French Fries. They *are* actually French." She turned to the heavy set one. "Pizza. Hmm, Italian or French, the jury's still out on that one, but you can bet it isn't from this side of the pond," she added in a conspiratory whisper. Finally she turned to the blonde who, oddly, waited patiently for her to dissect his meal selection. She frowned. "Baked chicken and mashed potatoes," she muttered. "Well, I'll give you this, the mashed potatoes are actually an American dish."

His friends smirked.

"*Native American*," she added with triumph. "The Europeans didn't know what a potato was until the First Nations fed it to him." With that she turned and walked back to her seat, the blonde's cold eyes following her. Nea snatched her purse from her chair and her coat and started to walk off.

"Aren't you gonna finish..." started Julia.

"Sorry, girls. I've lost my appetite."

Hecuba set a hand on Julia's wrist. "Let her go."



Nea walked for an hour in the growing dark, not really paying attention to where her feet were taking her. The night was cold, there was snow on the ground, but the campus was not quite the silent world of the previous two weeks. Students were chattering as they crossed the quad and other areas of campus to the dorms, some from the parking lots carrying their Christmas bounty. Everywhere was the sound of happy voices. Joseph Red Bird, another Algonquin student in his graduating year waved to her as he passed going the other way. She waved back, but

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did not stop to talk. Nea wandered aimlessly until she heard a pair of crows huddled in a tree cawing *Go-home! Go-home!* Only then did she pay attention to where she was and turned her feet toward Randall Hall.

When she got to her room, she noticed that Julia had brought the fish she had left on her plate when she stormed out of the cafeteria, and had split it between the ferret and her cat. She thanked her and got ready for bed. Julia thankfully did not ask too many questions, just if she had a nice walk. It was relatively early for them, but both girls were asleep in no time.



That night, Nea dreamed. These were dreams unlike any other she had ever had. She dreamed Gaganan woke her up as she lay sleeping and took her to the basement and taught her a new dance. It was a dance of memory in a way, remembering what it was like to *be* something else. It was a dance of cats, and by the time it was done, there were at least five watching her, not all of them 100% solid.

She woke up when the alarm went off. She wasn't quite ready to get up, but she rolled out of bed and made a bowl of cereal, throwing what she would need into her leather pack, including a wedge of pemmican for lunch. She set the bowl with the leftover milk in it down for Gaganan and Lulabelle and left for class, giving both of them a quick rub on the way out.

European History looked to be interesting. The teacher was a lean, energetic man who not only loved his subject, but was an experienced traveller. He had spent a lot of time in most of the countries whose history he taught, and threw in a lot of insights into the cultural reasoning behind some of the events. At the very least, it would not be a dry, boring read of facts, wars and assassinations.

History ended about twenty minutes before Medical Anthropology, and was across the campus from the cafeteria; which was why she had brought the pemmican. She grabbed an herbal tea from the vending machine and sat in the hallway outside the class reading her textbook and eating her lunch. She had dozed off when students began noisily pouring out of the classroom, snapping her awake. She started to close her book and found a long-stemmed red rose lying across it. She looked around, but could not see anyone watching her or who might have dropped it. There was no note.

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Curious, and a little disturbed, she slipped into the classroom as the last person was leaving and found herself a seat near the front of the small amphitheatre, once again burying her nose in the book. It did not take long for the room to fill up. Then the Professor entered, began calling off the roll. The course held a lot of promise, and, though deeply interested, she could not stop herself from yawning. She hid it the best she could.

Thomas squeezed into the door just after class started, slipping into the nearest empty seat. He set his books down and tried to look like he had been there the whole time. He leaned his head on his fist and scanned the classroom. He was deeply interested in the subject and had been eagerly anticipating this next semester, but the first half of the first day was always administration, roll, etc. and his attention was not really needed. Besides, anything he really needed, he could ask Professor Jameson later.

He saw several faces he knew, mostly from the department and other classes. A lot of them were new. One in particular caught his attention. Down in the front row, he saw a blonde head move forward and a dark one move back. The face that turned slightly sideways to speak to the person next to her was burned into his brain. There was no mistaking those high, dusky cheeks, those lips of burnt umber. His heart skipped more than one beat.

Since that Chinook afternoon on the Green the campus had seemed kind of empty no matter how many people crowded around him. He had been half distracted anytime he was outside, hoping to catch another glimpse of her, a chance to ask her name at the very least. It drove him crazy that he hadn't managed to get even that. He should have gone with her, not to his own hall, imminent weather be damned.

He could have sworn he heard her voice last night at work, but when he came out of the kitchen she was not there. He heard from the other workers that some First Nations girl had given three WASPs hell for some derogatory remarks they had made. He hated that he had missed it, but he had dropped a kettle of the acorn squash soup and had been in the back getting clean mop water to clean it up when it happened.

Before he knew it the class was letting out. He stayed behind to try and talk with her. She had both sides braided now, wrapped in fringed leather cases. She had two feathers on one of them, one black, one brown and white. He could not believe his luck. Here he was looking all over for her and she turns up in one of his classes. Could he dare to hope she was in the same major? As he worked his way through

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the desks to her, she stopped to check her schedule and map to find the best way to her next class and he saw the rose in her hand. He heart plummeted to his socks. She had someone.

He was frozen in place as she walked up the aisle and out the door. He was yanked violently out of his shock by the professor beaming him with a wad of paper. He turned, startled, looking into the man's laughing eyes. "What world were you in, Thomas? And why were you late?"

Thomas re-rooted himself quickly. "Oh, I... never mind. My mother called just as I was walking out the door. You know how she gets just after I leave her. Afraid I forgot to come back."

The man nodded, pushing his wire-rimmed glasses up on his nose. "Ah yes. Alzheimer's has its price for the family too. How is she doing?" he asked, gesturing for Thomas to help him gather things up.

Thomas shrugged. "As well as can be expected. She's no worse at least."

"What I wanted to talk to you about, Thomas, is that if you have hours to spare, I will need some help this term. I can throw maybe seven hours a week your way. I can only pay you six Canadian an hour, but it will go a long way to getting you that TA spot you want next year."

"Hey, six dollars is six dollars. That's... \$42 a week I don't have currently. I'll get you a copy of my schedule so you can figure out when would be best for you."

"Thanks."



Thomas was on the clean up portion of his job, all the cooking being done, when he heard *her* voice. Doris, the cashier, was talking to her. He poked his head out, saw first Doris wedging the rose in next to the register, then *her* sitting down at a table to the right of the kitchen door with two other girls: a bouncy, freckled red-head and a Goth. The Goth was giving her a very mischievous grin. "All right, Nea, where'd you get the rose and why did you give it away?" she asked.

'Nea,' he thought. 'Too simple a name for such a rare woman.'

He turned as Nea explained. He watched through the window, holding the door cracked so he could hear.

"I have no idea," Nea said. "I fell asleep waiting for my Medical Anthropology class and woke up with it on my book and no one else in sight."

"No note?" Julia asked.

The Speaker

“Not this time.”

“This makes the second...” Hecuba began.

“The third,” Nea interrupted, and then explained about the bud over the holidays. “On the one hand it’s kind of sweet and romantically mysterious. On the other, it’s down-right creepy. I mean, the person went so far as to dig up my *middle* name, but didn’t bother to find out what kind of flowers I like.”

“Which is?” asked Hecuba.

“Honestly? Camellias. Some look like roses in full bloom, and they have the most divine perfume. Not to mention they bloom in winter.”

Hecuba nodded, “And stand for fidelity, loyalty and perseverance.”

“Y’all don’t like roses?” gaped Julia.

“Not long stemmed reds,” said Nea. “They’re too...”

“Commercial,” Hecuba supplied.

“I guess,” Nea chuckled. “Every one is the same, no fragrance, no life, they never open up. They just droop. Now if they were at least an interesting colour maybe... Or garden roses, not the long-stemmed variety.”

“They make you feel like your affection can be bought,” summarized Hecuba.

“Yes! Exactly,” said Nea. “I would prefer a man who took the time to gather wild flowers to a man who just rang up a florist and gave them his credit card number.”

Julia snickered. “Oh yeah, I can just see a man picking flowers.”

“Not that far-fetched,” murmured Hecuba, sipping her drink.

Julia made a face, but relented. “Ok, maybe but... it’s the middle a’winter. What’s a guy t’ do then?” Julia asked.

“Improvise,” Nea shrugged. “My people give feathers as often as flowers. Tuwe got a pair of Twin Feathers last month. He’s going to give one to Meme when they get married this Spring.”

Julia laughed outright. “A feather for a wedding gift? Oh, *that’ll* go over well with the bride!”

“Oh yes it will. It’s a *very* big deal.”

“Thomas! Get the other end... before I... Ahhh!”

Thomas spun, saw one of the cooks struggling with a huge stockpot threatening to over turn and he was barely in control of it. He rushed to the rescue and did not hear the explanation; but what he heard had given him an idea.

Hecuba watched the kitchen door swing closed and a shadow pass the window. Someone had been watching and listening. She said nothing, tuned Julia back in

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again.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Passing Faire

Thomas normally did not pay much attention in Literature. He took the courses because they were a requirement, but the instructors rarely taught books he liked or that interested him. He was very well read, but he did not buy books frivolously. He borrowed them from the library and kept a list of his favourites. But he did own a few. Among them were an old hardback J. R. R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy, which his father had given him before he died, Jane Yolen's saga of the Great Alta (which sat beside every anthropology textbook he had ever bought), the Complete Shakespeare, including sonnets, and about a dozen weathered hardbacks of folk and fairy tales from different countries.

So when Professor Marchand announced they would be reading *Cyrano de Bergerac*, he was thrilled. "Your assignment," she began, "will be, of course to read the play. But, instead of analyzing it as many a dry and dusty professor would have you do, I want you to play *Cyrano*. You will each choose a person and write a paper extolling their virtues. It can be a love letter, a poem, an essay of praise, etc. You do not have to write their name on it. When you turn it in, I want a separate coversheet with your name on it, but no where else. These are due on Thursday. On the following Tuesday I shall be handing them back out, sans author's name as I will have already recorded your grades. Then one by one you will stand and read the one you have been given. Sound like fun?" she said, rubbing her hands together with glee. "We will begin our analysis of the story after the readings."

The Speaker

Thomas was actually looking forward to this assignment. If he was lucky, he could kill two birds with one feather. But first, he had to talk to someone he knew.

Lunch found him in the belfry of the old library with Joseph Redbird, checking the nesting sites of the Kestrels that wintered in the crevices. “So you are in love with a First Nations girl?” Joe chuckled, writing notes on his clip board.

“I think,” Thomas said, blushing furiously. “Well,... I ... Damn it, Joe, stop teasing me. Just... explain it.”

Joe handed Thomas his clipboard and reached into one of the holes, pulling out the kestrel inside and checking her over gently. He ignored the sharp beak biting into his fingers. “Which part, the flowers or the feathers?”

“I know feathers mean things. I get that they’re like flowers and that they are sacred gifts but... she mentioned twin feathers and I didn’t get to hear the rest,” he added sheepishly.

Joe laughed, setting the bird back into its hole, satisfied with its general health and weight. He set a freshly killed mouse inside to appease the bird and took back his board to write down his findings. “Eavesdropping were we? Man, you have to be smitten if you’ve resorted to that.”

Thomas was starting to feel frustrated. “Well, I thought she was taken, ‘cause she was carrying a rose in class. But then I heard her complaining about this unknown guy leaving her these roses everywhere. I’m not ready to confront her I think, but I don’t want to become another stalker either. I want... to court her properly I guess. Get the chance to get to know her, to see if it’ll stay the way it feels right now.”

The older man’s eyebrow arched. “And that is?”

“Words cannot describe it. Every moment without her is like cutting off my air. The sound of her voice makes me remember what that bronze skin felt like under my hands, makes me feel like her hair is brushing across my face. I catch even a fragment of her in a crowd, I don’t care which fragment: an elbow, a leg... and I know whether or not it’s her.”

“Oh yeah, that’s love. Might even be twin feather love,” he said as he handed Thomas the clipboard again.

“Will you please explain this ‘twin feather’ business?” he half-growled, half-laughed.

“Gimme a second,” Joe snarled, pulling a particularly reluctant bird out of his hole. Once he was done with him, he put him back, gave him the last mouse and wrote down his findings. “Let’s sit over here,” he said, gesturing to the parapets.

The Speaker

Once they were comfortably perched, he explained. “You know how sacred Eagle is to us, right?”

Thomas nodded. “You’ve told me that before. He’s the messenger of God.”

“Well, every feather on an eagle’s body is unique, like fingerprints. Except two, the wing feathers closest to the body. These two alone are exactly alike, every marking, every variance of colour. They are called the twins and without them an eagle, though he can still fly, cannot manoeuvre in the air. They become clumsy. When a person feels that they have found the other half of themselves, their soul mates you could say, they give one of the feathers to that person and keep the other themselves. This is saying that ‘where you are I am, and where I am you are.’ Because the feather represents the deepest part of that person’s soul. They symbolize a union of hearts and minds greater than the material wedding ring. To give one you are telling the receiver that you cannot fly without them. That you need them to make you whole.”

From the moment he had found out the twins were eagle feathers, he felt his heart sink again. “So much for that idea,” he sighed. “Even if I could find a pair, it’d be illegal to own it.”

Joseph’s eyes twinkled. “They are usually given in secret. She would hang it in her room or wear it in her hair. You could wear it around your neck, or keep it in a safe place. These are never woven into clothing.”

“But if I were caught with one...”

“Funny how marriage changes things,” he chuckled. “But I’ll admit, that is a bit extreme at this point in the game. Thinking too far ahead,” he said, tapping Thomas’s temple. “You need to think less drastic. If she has a stalker, you don’t want to rush anything.”

“Like I’d ever be able to get a hold of twin feathers,” he moaned. “What other kind of feathers would do?”

“You said she has two in her hair?”

Thomas nodded. “A black one and a banded brown and white.”

Joe thought a moment. “Probably a corvid and an owl. You’d want to give her something less dramatic at first. A songbird would be nice, but less likely this time of year.”

Thomas spied a blue-grey kestrel feather blown up against the parapet by his shoe and bent to collect it. “What about this? Is this acceptable?”

“Well, it symbolizes a messenger. So I don’t see why not. As for the flowers, stop by my house when you are ready and help yourself. Just tell Anang what you’re

there for.”

“Really? You don’t have to help me with my love life, you know,” Thomas said, shaking the older man’s hand.

He chuckled, not letting his hand go. “You can make it up to me by telling me who she is.”

Thomas flushed. “Only if you promise to tell no one. And that includes your wife. I don’t need Anang playing matchmaker.”

“Done.”

Thomas sighed. “They called her Nea. She just started this year, that’s all I know.”

“Sooneawa?” he gaped, letting his hand go. He whistled. “You don’t aim low, do you?”

‘Sooneawa. *That* was a name worthy of her,’ he thought. Her name continued bouncing around in his head, so it took him a moment to register what Redbird had said. “What? What do you mean I don’t aim low? She a chieftain’s daughter or something? Otherwise off-limits to the white man?”

Joseph dropped his head, shaking it. “Never mind, Thomas. I should not have spoken.”

“No, but you did. Is there something I should know?” he insisted.

Redbird sighed. “All I can say is that she is Mainganoden. She is not a chief’s daughter as far as I know, but we have not talked a whole lot. Anything else is for her to tell you. That is not my secret to share, but theirs. All I say is be sure that it is what you want before you give chase.”

“I am sure,” he said. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so sure in my life. But I’ll go slow. I’ll be sure of her before I declare myself. I’m not going to force myself on her.”

Joseph got off the wall and headed inside, collecting his research materials. “No. Follow your heart. Don’t force the issue, but do as your heart guides. Don’t over think things. If she is going to love you, let it be *you* she loves, not whatever you think she wants in a man. That always ends badly. Just ask Anang.”

Thomas nodded, grabbing his backpack and following the taller man inside. “I remember. ‘Never do something to win a girl that you don’t intend to continue doing the rest of your life to keep her’. I’ve heard it from Anang all too often. But I promise you, I didn’t feel this way about Mandy last year. That was infatuation with a pretty face who smiled at me. This... this goes deeper. To the roots of me,” he sighed.

The Speaker

“That is what I want to hear,” said Joseph, clapping him on the back.

“By the way, what does Sooneawa mean? Or does it have a meaning?”

Joseph led the way down the narrow steps to the library proper. “Her people live in a place called Zooneawagini Majiwe.”

Thomas repeated the word, committing it to memory. Similarities clicked. “Zooneawag... Sooneawa... They sound very similar. The usual bastardization of a word?”

He tipped his head thoughtfully, “Not quite. Not like getting Chippewa from Ojibwe. More like the accentual differences from one tribe to another. The Algonquin as a whole know that place as Zooneawagini. The Mainganoden know it as Sooneawagini.”

Thomas ran the words through his head, trying to remember what little Ojibwe Joseph and his wife had been teaching him since they became friends his first year. “Silver rose?” Joseph nodded. “Her name is Silver Rose?” Thomas breathed. The name sang in his heart.

“Not exactly. You are forgetting the breakdown. Ogini is Rose. Her name is Sooneawa, which is just Silver,” Joseph laughed, throwing open the library doors in front of them. “If you intend to pursue this, I’d recommend brushing up on your Ojibwe.”

Joseph stopped in the open door, blinked in the fierce, almost hot wind that set his braids dancing. “Hmm, Chinook,” he muttered. “Good sign.” He clapped Thomas on the back so hard he almost went sprawling. “The spirits are pleased with your decision. Which settles it. You are coming to dinner Sunday.”

Thomas knew better than to argue.



Nea dreamed again, the dance of cats in the basement. She dreamed it every night for a week with little change. Then Saturday night she dreamed they were interrupted by someone coming downstairs. They flipped on the lights, saw a room full of cats, shooed them off and left. Once they crept back into the room there was wholesale celebration until well in the morning.

She slept in on Sunday; was still in bed when Julia came home from church. She woke to Julia changing out of her nice dress. She rolled over, hugging Gaganan to her. “What’s wrong with that dress?” she asked her.

Julia looked at her confused. “Nothin’. I’m done with it.”

The Speaker

“Done?” Nea rolled over and looked at the clock. “Oh man! I slept that late?”

Sleep later, Gaganan moaned tucking his head under and covering his face. Suddenly his ear flicked towards the window. He rolled out of her arms and leapt to the sill. *Chinook,* he chirred.

“What is it?” Julia asked, going to her desk and looking out. On the Green below people were looking around, shedding coats. Girls with long hair were trying to untangle it from their faces in the sudden wind shift.

“Chinook,” Nea translated, jumping from the bed and throwing on jeans and a t-shirt. Julia immediately changed what she had been planning to wear to shorts and a tee. They darted out to join numerous people headed out to enjoy the warm weather however long it lasted.

Gaganan seemed suddenly full of energy, burned it off by playing tag with Nea and Julia, who had decided to play too. They confined their play area though, unlike last time. Even Handsome seemed to have more ‘get-up-an-go’, though he did not play long. Nea tired quickly and lay on her side, head propped up on her fist as she watched the others having fun. An Indian girl and her roommate had brought out a CD player and were playing exotic Hindi music. The two of them were dancing in their summer saris and Hecuba could not resist joining them. She had Princess with her and all three girls were taking their turns with the newly active reptile. Nea was not the only person watching them. A few young men were enjoying the show.

Slowly, the warm wind and the high sun had its way with her and she dozed back off again laying on her moose hide cloak.

Thomas was crossing the Green fresh from lunch with Redbird and his wife. He had a single Camellia blossom in hand though he was not sure why. He had been sure he wasn’t going to see her today. Anang had insisted it was better to be prepared. He had just reached the edge of campus when the Chinook hit. He deliberately took the long way, cutting down towards Founder’s Hall at the opposite end of the Green from his dorm instead of continuing up the road and going in the front door. The first time he had seen her was on the Green during a Chinook, so, as his feet crunched on the melting snow he had high hopes, though deep terrors of what he would do or say if he found her. After all, he didn’t have the letter with him. The best copy he had turned in and the original, hand-written copy was in his room.

He meandered in odd patterns amid the people enjoying the day, looking for signs of her. He passed a trio of girls dancing like exotic nymphs, two in saris of dark saffron and red, and a pale, black haired girl dressed head to toe in a golden

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yellow playing with a snake. Everyone in the vicinity was watching them as they writhed. He smiled, but turned back to his search. That was when he saw the cat. He was huge and snow white except where it looked like someone had spilled black paint on him all down his back and head and he was lying right in Thomas's path. Thomas stumbled, off-balance as he hopped over the animal to keep from stepping on him. He managed to avoid hurting the cat, but landed face first on the snowy turf, half on, half off a hide blanket spread on the ground.

He started to get up and found himself face to face with *her*. He lay there a moment more, frozen and unable to breathe. Her eyes were closed, her breath easy and deep as her cheek rest on her folded arms. "Angel, thy name is Aurora," he whispered.

Suddenly the cat was inches away, emitting a low warning growl, tail lashing. His green-gold eyes were flashing with warning. Thomas held up his hands to show he had no hostile intent, realized he still had the Camellia in hand. Slowly he set the flower down, a few inches from Nea's sleeping cheek and backed off. The cat frowned. Thomas blinked. It wasn't possible, but he could have sworn the cat was frowning. It sat back on its haunches and regarded him curiously. Thomas decided the better part of valour was to vanish and moved towards Cather Hall at once. He did not look back.

Gaganan sat back, watched the boy retreat. It was the same boy who Nea had tripped over the year before. The one that had sent her head spinning. Here he was leaving flowers by her sleeping, like the person who kept sending her roses. A whisper to a passing breeze sent the spirit whizzing after the boy. When it returned, it reported that the boy had gone into the building and all but collapsed against the wall holding his hand over his heart.

Hummingbird whispered in his ear. *This is to be. Gaganan looked at the jewelled spirit who hovered by his head. Encourage it. But do not force or rush it. It will come when it comes. Do not allow interference. That too will come.*

Beside him Nea stirred, but he licked her forehead, purring until she went back to sleep. When he turned back to Hummingbird she was gone. He sighed, laid down and napped himself.

An hour or so later Hecuba dropped onto the moose-hide next to Nea with the two girls from India just behind her. "Hey, Neal"

She stirred, sat up and blinked. "Hmmm?"

Hecuba's eyes fell on the red and white blossom lying in front of Nea. "Struck again, did he?"

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“What?” Nea frowned, her mind still foggy. She looked down and saw the flower. She sat up, picking up the blossom, took a deep breath of its wonderful, slightly citrusy perfume. *Gaganan, did you see...*

He rolled over onto his back, flashing his white tummy at her. *I’ve been napping,* he said, diverting her. It wasn’t a lie. He didn’t say *when* he had been napping.

She buried her fingers in the expanse of white fur. “Some gizhadan you are.”

He blinked at her. *I am a *wonderful* guardian. I had spirits watching you. And nothing dangerous approached you today.*

So my rose leaver is not dangerous?

I did not say that. This flower does not smell like the roses.

Frustrated she went for his underarms, tickling him. He sprang up, twisting sideways, and bolted, coming to a stop at the feet of one of the Indian girls who giggled. He looked up at her. *Oh, hello. ...You smell divine*

Hecuba, not sure what just transpired, her eye still on the Camellia, spoke up. “Riti and Roma have invited us to dinner tonight. They want to know if you want to come too. Julia as well. They are making an Indian dinner.”

“Bengali,” smiled Roma, the taller of the two sisters. “Mother sent us a huge care package, but it will spoil if we do not eat it and we cannot possibly eat it all before it does. So we thought we would share.”

“I’d love to,” Nea said.

Julia dropped down onto the hide positively beaming. “When?”

“Tonight,” Riti said.

Julia’s face fell. “Sorry, I can’t. I have a date tonight.”

“Since when?” Nea exclaimed, smiling.

“Since five minutes ago.” She turned and waved to a good looking young boy in a soccer jersey who smiled.

“Congratulations,” said Nea.

Hecuba chuckled, turning back to Roma and her sister. “What time?”

“Give us an hour, then meet us at Founder’s Hall,” said Riti and the two sisters darted off.

“How did this come about?” Nea asked Hecuba.

She shrugged. “I was the first person who didn’t tell them to turn off their music. Apparently their neighbours think it’s ‘caterwauling’. Now, you going to tell me about this?” she asked, holding up the camellia.

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“Nothing to tell,” she protested, taking it back. She brought it to her nose, breathing deep. “I was asleep. You didn’t see anyone near me while you were cavorting and flirting?” she teased, pushing playfully at both of them. They dodged, pushing back.

Lulabelle suddenly poked her head up from inside Julia’s collar, sniffing the air. *Ohohoh. Shiftocold again!* she said and dived back inside the shirt.

“Oh yeah, and he loves Lulabelle!”

“Inside, folks,” Nea said, getting up and moving to pull up the hide. “Wind’s going to shift. Besides, we want to get ready for dinner anyway and it’s going to snow tonight.”

Gaganan’s head came up where he was stretched out sleeping. *How do you know?* he said, getting off the blanket.

Well, it is, isn’t it?

Yes, but I didn’t tell you that, he complained. *I want to know who did.*

If you must know, I dreamed it, she growled, folding her cloak. Together they walked back to the dorm. Not two minutes after stepping inside, the wind shifted and the temperature began to drop dramatically.



Jonah entered Founder’s Hall at about 10pm, and shook snow from his coat in the hallway. He was feeling very buoyant and powerful. His weekend trips up the mountain always recharged him and this one was no different. He was not quite ready for bed but headed up the stairs to the suite he shared with Tolby and Coleman. Above him, yet unseen, he heard the voices of two females. He paused, listened to their quiet laughter, was pleasantly surprised to discover that one of them was Rosamund. ‘Time for a little damage control,’ he thought and continued up the stairs, first pausing to slick back his hair out of his face and straighten his collar.

The two girls stopped dead when they saw him. He backed down to the nearest landing and executed an elaborate and elegant bow allowing them to pass, and remained so until the girls decided they had no choice and passed him, single file, keeping close to the rail. He stood, and watched them go. Rosamund paused going down the stairs to glare back at him, trying to decipher the look on his face. He remained a mask of perfect gentility.

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Hecuba's mind worked furiously. She was certain he had not given her a second glance. When getting ready for dinner, she had double bound herself with wide silver cuff bracelets and worn slippers with red ribbons that laced to her knees. She was completely shielded, and she was glad. There was a predatory look in that man's scintillating blue eyes, and they were all for Nea.

Her mind turned at once to the camellia. She and Nea had joked over dinner that 'at least it was not another long stemmed rose'. She began to think back to a conversation they had had earlier that week about what kind of flowers Nea did like, and Hecuba remembered seeing someone eavesdropping from the kitchen door. It was no coincidence that the next mysterious gift she received was her favourite flower. Something had to be done.

Entering the dorm, Hecuba asked Nea, "That camellia... do you mind if I have one of the petals?"

"Sure, why?"

"Ritual."

Nea nodded and led her back to the room, let her pick the petal she wanted herself.

Hecuba took a deep breath in the room, sighed. "Well, the shampoo seems to be working on my allergies. Now to work on the other part."

Julia was not home yet, but Lulabelle was in her cage at the foot of the bed, sleeping in her sling.

"What other part?" Nea asked, setting the flower back in the bowl of water where she had it floating.

"The phobia," she said softly. "Thanks. I'll see you at supper tomorrow."

The next morning Hecuba got up just after Jenny left for class, and dressed in a simple white shift. She hung the hangman's noose on the outside of the door, then rolled up the rug and stowed it under Jenny's bed and swept the floor. She removed all the jewelry from her arms, putting on a single crystal on a golden chain, then splashed herself for a ritual wash. She removed certain things from her altar/apothecary chest and set them in the centre of the floor. She set all nine candles on the floor in a wide circle, placing her equipment just so. She then drew the curtains so that no light came into the room and removed Princess from her tank, let her wrap around her wrist and move where she chose to from there.

Remembering where she had set everything, she shut off the lights and walked with determined purpose to the centre of the candle circle. She knelt, murmuring her prayers to the goddess and offering praises to the spirits that be and began, one

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by one, to light the candles, calling each by their names, calling her corners. She dropped the match into a cup of pure water and took up the box of salt, poured it in a circle just inside the ring of candles. She had written her question upon a tiny scroll the night before, rolling the camellia petal in with it. This she addressed to each of the four corners, touching it to the flames of the candles at those points, then set it in the small brass brazier before her. She watched it burn to ashes, watched the smoke curl sky-ward, concentrating on the patterns.

Princess moved up her arm, hovered at her ear over her shoulder as she unwrapped a black glass lens from the raw, undyed silk in which she kept it. Handsome watched lazily from Jenny's bed, his eyes flickering over the candles as they danced. From a stoppered bottle she poured a small pool of a honeyed liquid onto the centre of the lens, then took up a silver spoon and dusted the glass with the ashes of the scroll. She picked up the lens, kissed the rim and began to tilt it, watching the liquid run in patterns on the surface. The candlelight flickered across the thick threads. She held the lens up at an angle, studied the patterns as they emerged. Princess's head swayed with the movements of the glass.

At first she saw the spread petals of an open flower. 'The camellia', she thought, 'not the closed bud of the roses.' Then, as she tilted it, it began to look more like an eye which slowly spiralled out to the elongated head of what must have been a dragon. Though the longer she stared at it, the more it looked like a horse. Another tip and the whole was smeared by a feather shaped form.

"The camellia was sent by a dragon who is a horse. But is the dragon protective or a threat?" She closed her eyes, hummed an ancient tune. She visualized her breathing, the form in the lens pressing on her mind. In a hazy, dream-like state she saw the kitchen door swaying on its hinges as if someone had gone through in haste. When it finally opened completely, the cat was sitting before it, watching something only he could see through the hazy fog that obscured what lay beyond. She heard a faint whirring hum beyond the threshold, and an occasional tiny beep. The cat got up, turning his back on the door and walked away, unconcerned.

She opened her eyes. 'If it were a threat, Gaganan would not turn his back on it.' "Show me the roses, then," she whispered.

Suddenly, without a breath of wind in the room, every last candle went out. She heard the dog's head come up from the bed, looking around in worry from the jingling of his collar. She breathed a soft, "Shhhhh," to calm Handsome, turned herself inward to ward off the sudden chill in the room. With cupped hands she drew up the positive energy from her belly and slowly pushed it out, spreading them

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in a circle over the candles which sprang to life one by one.

Bringing the snake from her bosom, where Princess had taken refuge, she held her up to her face. "Someone does not wish himself to be known," she announced. The snake's tongue flickered out to touch her nose. "That alone makes him untrustworthy."

She got up, put Princess away and cleaned up after her ritual. She broke the salt circle with the broom at each cardinal corner first, then turned on the lights and blew out the candles. She stared down at the salt ring in the fluorescent lights. There was a fine layer of ash instead. She reached over and stroked Handsome's head. "Looks like today will be a white day."

As she got ready for her first class, she made different preparations this morning. She wore a very Gothic styled white velvet dress with thick tights, placing a simple glamour on her boots to make them white as well. When she bound her hands in silver, she only bound the left, her 'receiving' hand. The right she left unadorned with any jewelry. "If I come under attack today, I'll be damned if I'm not going to retaliate in spades!" she told Handsome.

As one last precaution, before she left, she poured salt along the threshold of the door and windows.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Love and Loathing

When Nea joined Julia and Hecuba for dinner that night, she was surprised to see her all in white. “Let’s just say today was a white day and leave it at that for now, shall we?” she said pointedly.

Nea also noticed the lack of rings on her right hand, but did not ask, putting two and two together. “How did the thing with the camellia petal come out? Or have you used it yet?”

“I’ve used it. Stop by my room tonight and I’ll explain.”

Nea looked up from her food, worried. “That bad?”

“I have to give you that stuff your aunt sent you for Christmas. It’s all clean.”

“Oh, right!”

“You know,” Hecuba began. “You are looking a little pale lately. You all right?”

Nea shrugged. “I’m just tired.. I’m sleeping but...maybe I’m just taking too much this term. I’ve got twenty hours.”

“That’s a lot,” Julia said.

“Yeah, maybe I’m just in too much of a hurry. But... my advisor approved it, ‘cause some of the classes I am taking weren’t heavy work loads. I may cut back to 15 or 18 next semester though. I’m drifting off in class.” She changed the subject. “So, Julia, how’d the date go?”

Julia melted, went on for the rest of dinner and the whole walk back to the dorm. She fairly danced the whole way down the hall to their room. Nea and

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Hecuba stood at Hecuba's door, watching Julia go.

"Oh, yeah, she's in love," Hecuba sighed.

Jenny came out of the room while they stood there. "I'm just going to take Handsome for a walk," she said. "Leave the door unlocked. I don't have my keys with me."

"Will do," Hecuba said and led Nea inside. She handed her the basket with the bath supplies in it. "Close the door."

Only when Nea did so would she continue. "Ok, Number one. You have two admirers: Camellia and Roses. Camellia is entirely benign. Which is more than I can say for Roses. He is extremely dangerous."

"How dangerous?" she asked, her belly starting to feel hollow in spite of having just eaten.

"He blew my circle."

"Blew it?"

Hecuba nodded. "Kablooie blew it. Salt turned to ashes blew it." Nea gaped. "Yeah, not good."

"Do you know who they are?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. Oh, by the way, do dragons mean anything to your people?"

"Dragons?" Nea echoed, shaking her head. "No. The closest thing we have is Uktena, but he's more a serpent. Personally..." she hesitated, leaned back against the door, a dreamy look crossing her face. "There was this boy," she began, then explained briefly her encounter on the Green that first Chinook last semester. "It was the first thought that crossed my mind. I can't explain it. It's not what I picture dragon eyes to look like, but that was the image in my head, of looking into a dragon's eye."

Hecuba nodded. "You're not going to be able to explain it. If that is what you thought then that is what is and you have to figure out what it represents. It's either from your end or his."

"Do you have any idea what it all means?"

"Not yet," she sighed. "But when I do, if I can tell you, I will. Just... be wary of Roses."

Nea had to move as Jenny returned, headed down to her own room, her mind spinning. It was still whirring non-stop when she crawled into bed a short while later. By the time Julia had returned from her toilet, Nea and the cat were both sound asleep.

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Nea dreamed the same dream again. Only this time they did not stay in the basement. They danced the dance of cat and left the building through a little known way and the pair of them wandered the grounds. They met a fox hunting, and she wanted to remember being a fox, but that memory was more difficult, and did not come for her asking. When she woke, she still felt the yearning of wanting to be a fox, but it passed quickly with the sound of the alarm going off.



Thomas sat in Lit class waiting anxiously for his work to be read. The parade of prose had been long, filled with banalities, the occasional brilliance, poetry, and one which vilified the subject in high Cyrano style. He scanned the room during them, studying the other students, taking note which were the likely authors by their reactions, and how they looked around them when the class applauded ...or not.

One of the girls on the women's hockey team stood, read a piece with a sneer of disdain on her face:

Speak to me not of undying love. It is an illusion; for only gods cannot die. My heart, mind and soul are consumed by the goddess before me. No mere mortal woman this, but a pagan goddess ripe for fertile rites.

Her hair a mantle of night beneath which the stars of her face peer out. Her eyes are amber jewels that caress my soul at the merest glance. Her lips succulent petals of ochre rose and her kisses are the honeyed ambrosia upon which humble bees become gods of fertility.

Ah, grant me but a taste of godhood and I shall be content. Take me to thy breast and consume me upon that altar of your body. Destroy all weakness and make me anew, make me a god among men.

When she was done, though some applauded weakly and others laughed at her hammed up reading, she threw the paper into the trash can with a flourish. The teacher dove for it. "Megan!" she exclaimed. "That is hardly the way to treat another author's work."

Thomas craned his neck, spotted one person who wasn't snickering: Jonah Jacobi. He was staring hard at Megan, scowling with murder in his eyes. When the teacher smiled in his direction, he put on a face of the long suffering. "Jonah, your

turn,” she said.

As he strode down to the front of the class, all the girls turned to watch him, their eyes almost glazing over in obvious lust. Even the instructor was listening with rapt attention. He preened himself, running his manicured fingers through his neat blonde locks and cleared his throat. Thomas leaned back in his chair, prepared to be bored to tears. Shakespeare from Jonah’s mouth would sound banal.

“I see you moving through the crowds,” Jonah began. Thomas sat up in an instant. Jonah glanced up, eyebrow raised, and for a second the two met eyes. Jonah smiled and read on, “I only catch a glimpse, an elbow, part of a shoulder, but I know it is you,” he said, addressing one of the girls in the front row. “It is the way you move, the way you move *me* that leaves me knowing you at a glimpse. But I do not know *you*. I breathe your soul but I do not know what moves it.” He moved on to her neighbour, leaning in. The girl looked as if she were likely to faint. “Enlighten me, angel. An angel you must surely be, for nothing so fair of form and soul could have been birthed upon this dusty ball.” He lifted her chin, smiling into her eyes. “Say then, instead that it is from heaven’s infinity that you tumbled, for I will believe no other.”

He moved on, began to prowl through the desks, inserting frequent dramatic pauses and gestures. “I lose sight of you in that crowd. You move on whither you must away and I turn to my own dull tasks, no more alive than a mere machine, until my eyes catch sight of you once more. I live to hear the sound of your voice carried to me by sacred winds. A host of angels can never sound as sweet as one word from your lips, however humble that word. You could breathe life into refuse, for indeed that is what I am, until your passing. Your very nearness makes men of stones.”

Thomas’s mind raced. He had thought his piece somewhat ordinary, far less than worthy of Nea. But the reactions Jonah was getting gave him hope. That the girls were all fawning was normal behaviour around Jonah. But the men in the class were paying attention as well. One young man whom everyone knew had an eye for the boys and who hated Jonah with a passion seemed on the verge of tears.

“My heart labours beneath a perpetual ache that it knows not the least of your heart’s desires,” he moaned, pounding his chest with a fist. “Your intimates know what makes you laugh, and yet I must be satisfied with the sound of that laughter, cursed to never be the bringer of such glorious sound.”

‘Yet?’ Thomas thought. ‘That’s not how the line goes.’

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“They know what pleases your eye, are blessed with the secrets of your thoughts. Oh agony, but that you give to them so freely what I would trade my life to know. A smile from you and I would die a happy man.

“But what is so easy for them, to converse with an angel, strikes terror to my soul. Were you to deny me would be to commit me to eternal damnation, agony sublime. Dare I risk it? Carry to my grave the memory of that one perfect moment when our eyes met and engulfed worlds, that one moment of perfection, of bliss? Or risk all on a chance of an eternity with you, perchance to lose my soul. A single feather in your fingers would be a sword plunged into my heart should you refuse my advance. No, far better to kiss the saffron moon and dream it your hand and be content, than to throw caution to the wind and ask you for a word.”

‘My advance?’ Thomas thought, flipping back through his original notes. ‘That was supposed to be ‘my *unworthy* advance’,’ he fumed. ‘The pompous bastard’s changing things.’

“Yes, I fear. I, who would charge into battle alone to count coup on a hundred enemies, fear to breathe the same air as you. For to speak with you is to risk my soul. But is not heaven worth any risk? Even Hell? Still, I shall stay my hand from the curtain, remain in shadow until I am certain my suit is welcome. Breathe but a word of encouragement and I am on my knees before you,” Jonah said, falling upon his knees before the instructor, arms spread. “Say you will have me and I will be complete. Grant me a single feather and I can fly.”

The class burst into applause, some standing. One of the girls in front fainted. It took the teacher a few moments to realize what had happened. Thomas thought for a moment that she might kiss Jonah. When she noticed the girl on the floor she reacted immediately, ordering people to get back and make room, sent someone to call for help. “The rest of you, leave your copies on my desk and I will redistribute them on Thursday when we’ll pick up where we left off. Class dismissed.”



Jonah took the letter out of the printer. He had reprinted it on fine parchment paper, the kind one would reserve for resumes. He read it over again, to make sure it was flawless, then smiling, he folded it carefully, measuring the edges before creasing it. It had to be perfect. He picked up the single rose he had purchased, a half open bloom the outside of whose petals was a rusty red and the inside an orange-yellow. It was not a red rose, but when he had seen it, he had been drawn to

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it. The clerk in the store had said it was, in the Victorian language of roses, for deep desire. It, too, was perfect. The right words, the right flower, the right moment and anything could be overcome. He strode out of the dorm with a strut in his step and walked down to the campus post office.

He waited until he could get a moment alone with the only female clerk, then crossed to the counter and worked his wiles. "Excuse me, but I was wondering if you could help me?"

She leaned on the counter, and was instantly lost in his brilliant blue eyes. "Certainement, what do you need?"

Her accent betrayed her as a Québécois, and as such, likely to be taken in by a tale of love and woe. "Well," he began, twirling the rose blossom in his fingers, "I am a man in love, and... in the doghouse."

"Oh, you poor t'ing," she murmured. "ow can I 'elp?"

"Well, my love, without whom it is not worth breathing, is furious with me over a petty argument we had and... I want to apologize, but she won't see me or take my calls. So I thought, if I wrote her a letter... but then," he went on, gazing deep into her eyes, "if I did and she saw my handwriting on the envelope or my name on it, it would end up in the trash without a thought. So, I thought if I didn't put it in an envelope, just put it in her mailbox..."

"Oui, dat eez a good idea, and dis rose is a lovely gesture, simple, not overwhelming."

"But I don't know her box number," he whispered. "I know you can look it up. If you would just put this letter and the rose in her box, you don't have to tell me which one it is, I shall be content. It would mean the world to me," he sighed, taking a deep breath of the rose.

The clerk wiped a tear from her eye, looked around to see if anyone was looking. "I shall do it. For love. What eez 'er name?"

"Rosamund Majiwe," he answered.

She consulted her lists, came back, frowning. "I 'ave no Rosamund anywhere, monsieur. I 'ave a Zooneawah Mazhiwe," she said, "but no Rosamund."

"That is her. She rarely goes by it. Rosamund is her middle name," he answered, handing her both the flower and the letter. "My gratitude would know no bounds..."

She hesitated, then took both and set them inside the appropriate mailbox, halfway down the wall of boxes. When she returned to the counter, the well dressed gentleman was gone.

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Hecuba was in the bathroom that evening brushing her teeth when she heard a toilet flush behind her. She glanced up, having thought she was alone. The door did not open, though it was ajar as it had been when she entered. It swung completely closed then open again and she looked down, saw Gaganan strolling out from under the stall door. She got his attention, and beckoned him over. She rinsed quickly, wiped her mouth and put her toothbrush away. She took an extra moment to look under the toilet and shower stalls before coming back to where he had perched on the centre wall the long, two sided mirror was mounted on.

Even though she was certain they were alone, she lowered her voice. “You know who the Camellia came from, don’t you?” she said.

His whisker twitched, but he nodded minutely.

“Will you tell me who?”

He shook his head, rattling his tags.

“But you’re ok with it?”

The cat thought a moment, glancing at his image in the mirror, paused to smooth down his chest ruff. Finally he nodded.

“We need to talk,” Hecuba said. Gaganan gave her a wearied look. “I have a way,” she replied. He flicked an ear her way, one towards the door. “Nea said you can read, yes?” He nodded slowly. “Come to my room. Jenny’s not back from class for another half hour which is more time than I need.”

Gaganan hopped off the rail immediately and trotted down the hall to her room. Once inside, Hecuba closed the door and pulled a spirit board out of the top of her wardrobe and laid it on the floor before the cat. She set the triangular pointer in the centre. “Do you know what this is?” she asked him, getting on the floor beside him.

He shook his head. She explained the basic principal to him. “In this case, though, all you have to do is spell out your answers to my questions. Since you cannot hold a writing utensil, and your paws are a little big for a keyboard, this will have to do.”

Gaganan set his paw on the pointer and moved it to the word ‘yes.’

“Ok. I’m first going to tell you the results of my scrying the other day, and maybe you can explain some of the images.” He nodded and listened as she described everything she had seen, including the changing of the salt ring to ashes,

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and asked, “What I want to know is what does the horse signify?”

Gaganan thought about the vision, then began to spell out his answer. He took shortcuts, spelling out only the words necessary to make his point. “Eye, dragon, horse, feather all same soul. Is good. Rose is bad. Will not tell. When time 2 be known will be known. Guard against Rose. Rose is dream snake. Know this now. Her power will not protect her from him. This is what horse is 4. You help horse,” he paused, grinned and continued, “when you know who is horse.”

“All right then. If you need anything, let me know. If you need protective magic, or healing for you or her, come tell me. I’ll keep this next to the desk so we can communicate when we need to.”

“Yes,” he said with the pointer. He saw the look on her face of disappointment that he would not tell her who the horse was, grinned and spelled out, “A cat will keep his secrets.”

“So you do,” she smiled. “Now you need to go. Jenny will be back soon,” she said, slipping the board on its side between the desk and the wall. She let the cat out just in time, seeing Jenny coming in the door from the landing. Handsome covered the cat’s exit by leaving the room and trotting over to her, begging for a walk. Hecuba took Jenny’s things for her and put them on her bed, leaving her with her hands free to walk the dog.



That night saw continuation of Nea’s wild dreams. Once again she was in the basement, only this time trying to remember being a fox. It came easier this time, only an hour and the presence of a fox spirit. Then Rabbit came, and she was a rabbit. Excited by the increasing ease of change, she wanted to try owl and... it did not go so well. She woke to Gaganan licking her forehead. She rolled over and tried to go back to sleep, pulling him down off her pillow and curled up around him.

He growled, *Let go, get up and get to class.*

She ignored him. He fought his way free, hopped up onto the sill where the alarm clock was. He studied it a second, reading the dials, then moved the volume bar to high. Lulabelle buried herself in her bedding. Flattening his ears, he pressed a toe pad to the on/off/alarm button and flipped it all the way to the left. Music blared into the room. Nea jumped out of bed and slammed her hand onto the radio, fumbling ‘til she figured out what he had done. She snarled at him, but got dressed, throwing on a wool flannel shirt, jeans and her mukluks.

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She had a test in History that morning, and actually fell asleep during it. Mortally embarrassed, she slinked out of class and headed for the student union building. She bought a cup of coffee at the bookstore and headed into the post office to get her mail. She was shocked to see only a single piece of paper and a rusty, orange rose.

It wasn't red, but it was still a long stemmed rose, setting off alarms. She stood there holding the blossom, staring at it until a voice beside her murmured appreciatively. "That is gorgeous. You are so lucky, Nea.

Nea looked over to see Little Doe, a Haida junior and the only other female First Nation on campus. They had not interacted much beyond their initial meeting. With so few at the school they made a point of meeting all the incoming First Nations. "Oh hi, Little Doe."

"So you have an admirer already?" Little Doe grinned, closing her own mailbox. "Who is it? Anyone I know?"

Nea shook her head. "I don't even know who it is."

"Ooo, a *secret* admirer. How romantic."

"Actually, I think this one is coming off more as a stalker." She took the letter out of the mailbox. "I'll... I'll see you later, Little Doe. I need to...get to class."

She took the letter and her coffee outside, headed for her next class. In an attempt to wake herself up, instead of sitting in the warmer hallway outside the lecture hall, she sat against a tree in the courtyard in front of the building. She stared at the letter without opening it for a long time, dreading what it might contain. Her uneasy reverie was disturbed by someone walking past on a cell phone. His voice carried across the snow covered lawn as he shivered, telling whoever was on the other end "Yes. I'm there right now."

Nea took a few swallows of the coffee to steady herself before setting it aside and unfolding the paper. The letter was computer printed though whoever it was had used a fancy script font. It was addressed to 'Rosamund, my heart's desire'.

As she read the text, she felt a softening within her, a growing warmth that she could not explain. The words touched her deeply, stirring her soul, as if he had somehow gotten into her mind and discovered those things which would move her most. Her eyes actually began tearing up, torn between what she had been warned about this person and the instinct that such a beautiful soul could not harm her. The letter was not signed.

She picked up the rose, which she had almost discarded and took a whiff of its petals. There was a hint of fragrance that had not been bred out of it, and it was

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unusual and beautiful. It was even half open. She heard the faint sounds of footsteps on snow behind the tree and turned to look, found herself staring at a pair of expensive black dress shoes and sterling suit pants. Following them up, she saw the blonde from that night in the cafeteria leaning casually against the tree trunk in an expensive, wolverine trimmed coat holding a matching blossom to his nose.

“Ah,” he sighed, breathing deeply of the flower, “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

She jumped to her feet. “You!” She looked from the rose in her hand to the rose in his, her heart racing so fast she thought it might jump out of her ribcage. She felt a wash of horror splash over and through her.

“Yes. We were never formally introduced.” He took a half step back and gave her a full formal bow. “I am Jonah Cassius Jacobi, Esquire. And you are the magnificent Rosamund Majiwe.” He moved to kiss her hand but she jerked away, jumping back.

“Don’t touch me,” she hissed.

He gave her a wounded look. “It would sadden me deeply, but... as you wish, my heart.”

“My name is Sooneawa,” she insisted. “Not Rosamund, not ‘my heart’, not... not anything from your mouth.”

“But, I do not understand. What could I have done to have caused such hostility?”

She was not certain about his manner anymore. A moment ago she would have sworn his expressions were feigned, now... now there was something else there; still not what it pretended to be, but the look perhaps of a fisherman who is beginning to suspect his prey is going to slip the hook. “You utter words of casual bigotry and have the audacity to ask me that question? What bet have you got going on the side that makes you even *think* you can have me? If you were the last man on earth, the human race would be doomed. First you stalk me, invade my privacy, have my records searched,” she fumed, ticking the items off on her fingers, “then tell your friends *literally* behind my back that I am only a minority quota and thus unwelcome here. That about sum it up?”

“I was with my friends, I was not ...myself. I had a difficult time over Christmas,” he attempted, sensing suddenly he was losing control. “I was not speaking of you.”

She laughed. “You were complaining about the First Nation fare in the cafeteria. Who else did you mean? Or... did you possibly think I might have been

something *other* than a native? No, for you I'm probably just an exotic, a challenge. Your *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*!"

He grabbed her wrist, pulling her to him, pressing her hand to his chest. "How dare... how could you think such a thing? You've read my confession of love, my need and desire, how can you believe you are no more than a challenge?"

Knowing she could not break the grip, she waved the letter between them. "This? This isn't even in your hand," she growled. "By the way, my compliments to your ghost writer. He's damned good. Or was it a woman?"

His sapphires eyes flashed dark for a moment and she suddenly had a vision of a serpent about to strike; it lasted but a breath. He let go of her. "What makes you think I didn't write it?"

"Because you don't have a soul this pure. Words like this do not come to those who cannot feel them. Nothing you have done to 'win me' meshes with anything in this letter. This letter speaks of an attention to the important details you have woefully overlooked. Every step you've taken has proved you don't know me enough to love me." she snarled. "Of course I do not know you. Have I not proven to you that I am trying to do so? I am... I feared this reaction, this rejection. I had hoped to romance you from afar, to prepare you for meeting me. I feared I was too handsome to be taken seriously. I'll have you know I am not here on a 'jock' degree. I am not in a fraternity. I have only my few friends that I keep close. I entered pre-med this year. I intend to be a surgeon."

She found herself actually growling deep in her throat even as she spoke, "Let me tell you something, viper," she hissed. He seemed momentarily taken aback by the remark. "Snake is very powerful medicine to my people. He is a healer of unsurpassed merit." She watched his ego puff up at those words, then promptly took a pin to it. "But his bedside manner sucks. You may have the wit and intelligence to get you through the training. You may even have the looks to seduce every nurse, intern and woman in power along your way. But you severely lack the personality or the sympathy to be a physician of *any* sort. I wouldn't bring my aunt's dog to you for healing. You don't even have the manners it takes to be a decent human being."

He drew a sharp breath at that, yet managed to keep his temper. "You wound me, woman. I have done nothing to deserve this."

"Don't you mean 'squaw'?" she snapped. "It's what you are thinking, isn't it?"

"Of course not!" he protested. Jonah watched her honey brown eyes blaze darkly with her rage. He saw other things sparking in there. Rather than raising his

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ire with her words, they roused something else. His need for her, to possess her fully consumed him to the point he did not hear the words she railed at him. Instinct took over. He silenced her with a kiss.

He seized her violently by the head and pulled her to his face in a kiss. Teeth collided painfully, and she tasted the copper of her own blood. Unable to break his grasp, her hands remaining free, she grabbed for the softest, most vulnerable part she could think of and twisted. He released her at once, jumping back in shock as the pain brought rationality to the fore again.

Nea did not slap him. Her rage built beyond the point of rationale, she balled up her left fist and, swivelling from the hip, threw her weight into a sharp uppercut that rattled his perfect teeth. She seized the letter, ripped it up and stomped it into the slush on the ground along with the rose. Snatching up her things she headed for the safety of the occupied building.

He called her back. “Rosamund, you do not want to do this.” There was a clear warning in his voice.

In answer she turned and threw her coffee cup at him. She missed, hitting the tree as he dodged, which crushed the cup, throwing hot coffee on his face and clothes.

Tolby stepped up behind Jonah. “You want I should...” he began, was silenced by Jonah’s hand.

“I have tried to be civilized. Now I shall play it her way,” he said in a disturbingly quiet voice.

Tolby handed him his handkerchief to clean his face, which was already reddening where the liquid seared him. “Dirty?” he grinned.

“I want a strand of her, Tolby,” he said, and walked away. He stopped, looked down at a piece of the letter that clung to his shoe. She had been right about one thing. Staring straight ahead to the mountain rising above the campus in the distance he spoke. “And Tolby.....”

CHAPTER NINE:

Cat Traps

Thomas was late to class. He got in just before things started and most of the seats were full. He had wanted to get there early enough to get a seat close to her, perhaps a chance to talk to her before class; but Fate had conspired against him. Doris's ancient mother had broken her hip and she had begged him to cover for her at lunch. She swore she would make it up to him later and he had grudgingly agreed. Unfortunately, the lunch line closed one minute before Medical Anthropology began, and he had to sprint the whole way across the campus. His chest was burning when he finally dropped into the nearest seat he could find.

The subject of the day's lecture was completely lost on him. A letter was burning inside his jacket pocket, pressed against his shirt begging to be delivered. He had finally groused up the courage to do it. Today was going to be the day. He spent the whole class watching her from across the room. He noticed her cheeks were flushed, and she kept rubbing her left hand as if she had hurt it. It also looked like she was biting her lower lip, occasionally touching it. About halfway through the lecture her flush had faded, leaving something of a pallor behind. She seemed altogether unwell. By the end of the session, she had started to doze off.

By the time Professor Jameson gave the week's assignment, Thomas was more than ready. He stood first, gathering his things, his hand moved to his breast pocket where he had the letter and the kestrel feather. He waited in the hallway as she worked her way down the row towards the aisle to up and out, practically bouncing

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on the balls of his feet. As soon as he realized what he was doing, he stopped, smoothed back his dark, loose curls with his hand trying to control his nerves.

Just as he moved to intercept, he was stopped by a bony hand on his shoulder. “Don’t even think it, Hard-luck. A better man than you is already sleeping in that teepee,” Tolby sneered.

Thomas stiffened. Jonah and his crew had been calling him Hard-luck Harlan ever since he ran afoul of them during his freshman year. What Jonah wanted, oddly, Jonah got. The elder Jacobi was a rich but weak man who provided his son with his hearts desire. And what daddy’s money could not buy he found another way to get. Jonah consistently earned higher grades in any class they were in together, even when Thomas clearly had the better work. He had finally given up on trying to get justice, trusting Karma to eventually do it for him.

Thomas and Tolby stared at each other for only a moment before the red head laughed and walked away. By then, Sooneawa was gone. Dragging his feet outside, Thomas tried to come to terms with what Tolby had said, what he had ultimately meant. He cut across the grass, staring at his feet, hands deep in his pockets when he kicked a coffee cup. Sighing, he bent and picked it up, looked around for the lid and saw the crushed rose.

Squatting by the flower, he looked up and around, saw the dark patch on the tree where the coffee must have splattered, the space at its base where the snow had melted completely as if someone had been sitting there, waiting. All around the area were small fragments of a fine linen paper ripped to pieces. “Looks like I’m not the only poor sod around here having trouble with Eros,” he sighed, began gathering up the pieces of someone else’s failed romance.

His intent had been to throw it away, to keep the campus clean. Too much time spent with Redbird and his people last summer working on a paper, he guessed. To him it was almost automatic to leave a place as he had found it. But something on one of the fragments caught his eye, prompting him to flip over others and try to read them. “...earnness makes men of stones...”

He forgot the rose and the coffee cup, began to search feverishly for the rest of the letter, stuffing them into the safety of his pocket. As an afterthought, he snagged the cup and its lid and pitched them in the nearest trash, leaving the rose where it was, trampled in the slush, to decompose. He ran back to Cather Hall, taking the steps three at a time. Henry looked up from his desk where he was laying out photos, picking them from strings criss-crossing the air above his work area. “Don’t you have a class right now?” he asked.

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Thomas did not answer him, but headed straight for his desk and began to empty his pocket of the letter pieces. Henry crossed the room, shaking his rather shaggy head, to see what had his roommate in such a state. Thomas was assembling a torn letter like a jigsaw puzzle. "I take it she didn't like your letter," he muttered, patting Thomas on the shoulder.

Uncharacteristically, Thomas shrugged him off. "Does this look like the letter I wrote?" he snapped. The more he assembled and read, the angrier he got.

Henry glanced over it. "A single feather in your fingers would be a sword plunged... yeah, that looks like it."

Thomas took the letter out of his pocket and handed it to his roommate. Henry opened it up, glanced over the firm, well rounded letters of Thomas's handwriting. "Wait, that's typed... this... if this is the original where'd that come from?"

Thomas leaned on the desk, staring at the wall before him, his mind racing backwards. The only people who had seen the letter was Henry, cause he had peeked while Thomas was writing it and he had wanted an opinion; Professor Marchand, who had graded it, and the entire lit class when Jonah had read it.

"There are some differences," Henry commented, comparing the two documents. "Whoever took this screwed it up."

"Not enough for someone to have written it down while Jonah was reading it," he said aloud to himself.

Henry's head turned. "Jonah read this?" he asked.

Thomas levelled his gaze to Henry's green eyes. "In class. To a *rapt* audience. And then Patricia fainted... and..." In his mind, he saw the chaos in the classroom; saw people passing the desk dropping off their papers on their way out. Even he had dropped the one he had in his possession on the desk. But he distinctly remembered seeing Jonah walk out... an easy four feet away from the desk. In the chaos he *had* to have walked out with the paper.

"He must have meant his piece for Silver, and realized it was drivel," he thought out loud.

"Wait," said Henry. "Who is Silver?"

"Sooneawa," he said, "that's what it means: Silver," and explained his theory. "Tolby insinuated that Jonah was already sleeping with her. But that doesn't fit what the guys at work told me about the incident that first day back from break."

Henry handed Thomas his letter back. "Since when has any girl been rational where Jonah Jack-ass-obi is concerned?"

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He put it back in his jacket pocket. “Damn it, now what do I do?”

Henry shrugged, pulling down another picture and laying it on his light box. “You’ll do what you always do. You’ll take a long walk, and then you’ll punt.”



Nea practically slept through physics. Being in the back of an enormous amphitheatre, it was highly unlikely the instructor noticed. She only woke up when her neighbour was trying to get past her to leave. She felt completely drained as she headed for the cafe, not really sure if she had an appetite or not. She dropped onto a table just inside the door without bothering to get in line and get food, set her head on her folded arms and promptly dozed off.

Julia tapped her arm, rousing her. “You ok, hon?”

Nea lifted her head, blinked. “Huh? Oh, yeah, just wiped out. Where’s your food?”

“Where’s yours?” she countered. She jerked her thumb back to where Hecuba stood in the line. “Hec’s holding my place. We just got here. Class ran over. You gonna eat? I’ll get you something.”

She rubbed her face. “Nah. I’m... not really sure I’m hungry.”

“Then why’d ya come to the cafeteria?”

“Auto-pilot.”

Julia gasped as Nea put her hand on her head, trying to still the throbbing. She looked up. “What?”

“What did you do to your hand?” she pointed. Nea looked at it. The knuckles were a little scraped up. Nea flexed. It felt stiff. “And your lip!” Julia continued, seeing it for the first time.

Nea touched it lightly. “I’ll explain when you get back. Just bring me water and some ice.”

Five minutes later, Julia set two glasses in front of her: one of water, one of ice and pulled out her handkerchief. She spread it out and dumped the ice into it, making an ice pack for her to put on her hand.

“Thanks,” Nea mumbled, pulling a small brown bottle from the leather bag she always carried at her hip. She poured some of the liquid into the cap and drank it, grimaced and gulped water down.

Hecuba set her tray down and immediately handed her a roll with a smirk. “Willow bark?” Nea nodded. “Kinda bitter straight. That’ll kill it,” she said pointing

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to the roll.

Nea bit into it thankfully, putting the make-shift ice pack on her left hand.

Hecuba got straight to business. "So, what happened?"

"I found out who Roses is."

Both girls exchanged looks, then leaned over their trays to listen closely. "You remember the blonde in line that first day back, the one with the anti-foreigner attitude which seemed to include First Nations as well?"

"Oh, yeah. How could we forget?" Julia exclaimed.

"Him."

"You are kidding," Hecuba dead-panned, her face unreadable.

"After saying all that stuff and being confronted by you he still thought he had a chance?" Julia drawled.

Hecuba rolled her eyes. "He was 'courting' her before that. Remember the dozen roses?"

"Oh yeah. But still, after you chewed him and his friends a new one, he still kept comin?"

Nea nodded. "I got this letter today, with another rose, though at least this one wasn't red. The thing is... it was the most beautiful letter I've ever read. Seriously. It was soulful and poignant and..." she sighed, stifled a yawn. "So when he showed up I was completely thrown. He had an identical rose in hand and quoted Shakespeare and never once apologized for his racial slurs."

"The audacity," Julia muttered through her food.

"So when you spurned him he hit you," Hecuba guessed.

Nea shook her head and explained what had happened. They laughed.

"Imagine that pompous ass a doctor," Julia chortled.

"Well, then I told him I thought he should become a plastic surgeon. On account that he would then be surrounded by arrogant and shallow people and he could be as arrogant and shallow as he wanted... that was when the smarmy bastard kissed me!"

Hecuba started choking. Julia dropped her fork. Once Hecuba was able to talk she gasped, "He bit your lip?"

"No. He kissed me so hard I cut my lip on my own teeth. Since I couldn't break his grip I grabbed more sensitive things and tried to break that."

Julia howled with laughter. Hecuba covered her grin with the back of her hand. "Well, he let go," Nea giggled, stifling another yawn. "Then I clobbered him, which is how I hurt my hand. And threw my coffee at him. So if he seems a little red in the face we'll all know why."

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When they managed to control their mirth long enough for intelligible conversation, Hecuba asked her, “Are you going to eat at all? You look a little pale.”

Nea yawned, no longer bothering to cover it. “I don’t think so. I don’t even know why I came here.”

“Auto-pilot,” said Julia.

“Right. I may just grab a bowl of cereal or something in the room or one of those toaster things.” She stood. “Listen, I’ll catch up later. I’ve been falling asleep all day and I just want to go to bed.”

“You look exhausted,” Hecuba agreed.

“Well, I know she’s been sleepin’,” said Julia. “She’s always dead to the world when I go to bed and when I get up.”

Hecuba frowned. “Sounds like you need to go to the health centre.”

“Tomorrow,” she groaned. “Or this weekend. Right now I’ve just got to get some sleep.”

Gaganan was curled up on the bed when Nea got in. He looked up when she opened the door. He watched her throw her coat at the nearest chair and then fall, fully dressed, into bed beside him. He sighed, licking her cheek. He got up, walked to the foot of the bed and grabbed the fur blanket folded there in his teeth and pulled it over her. Then he crawled underneath it himself and curled up with her. She put her arm around him, snuggling her face in his fur, never once waking up.

When Julia came in and saw this, she smiled. She picked the coat up where it had fallen and hung it on the hook on the back of the door. She sat down at her desk and worked on the computer for a few hours before going to bed herself.



That night Nea had the most vivid dream. Gaganan woke her by licking her temple while purring. She was a cat, crawled out of her clothes and followed him to the door. He led her outside and across the moonlit Green to the clump of trees. He scaled one easily and sat on a branch waiting for her. Her trip up was less graceful, requiring full concentration on her part, but soon she was beside him on the branch, stifling a yawn. There was an owl in the tree with them. She chatted for a little while with the owl, taking the time to speak slowly to understand her. After a bit she realized *she* was an owl and flapped her wings in excitement.

Gaganan’s ears went back, listening to someone or something she could not see. *I have to go. Owl will teach you to fly. If you fall, be a cat. You’ll land better,*

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he said, jumping from the tree like a flying squirrel and landing neatly on the ground. He trotted off muttering under his breath to the invisibles.

She turned her attention to the owl.

Her flying lessons began fair enough. Gliding was easy. Climbing and controlling was less so. She caught a fair wind and found herself well above the campus. She was maybe 15 feet above the highest trees on the Green. It was breathtaking. The owl hovered beside her, trying to show her how to control her flight. She was just beginning to pick up on the subtleties of which feathers had to be moved and how to change her directions and altitude when the wind died. Her support gone, she tumbled like a kite.

CAT! whoooed the owl.

Nea spun in mid air, shifting to the form easiest for her to take. She was a small, fluffy, grey and white cat when she hit the top branches, tumbling halfway through them until she caught a claw on a lower branch and snagged. She cried out in pain, tried grabbing the limb with her other paw to unhook herself but it was caught. Panic and pain made her irrational, and she hung there crying. The owl was flying in when she was shooed off by a young human male climbing the tree.

“Go on, you. Leave it alone!” he barked.

The owl landed on a higher branch, watching with interest.

Nea felt hands supporting her back, heard soothing, soft words as the young man felt along her paw and found the snagged nail. He slowly worked it loose, laughed as she immediately latched onto his arm. He leaned his belly against the branch and partly unzipped the worn bomber jacket, tucking Nea safely inside. “Relax, and don’t scratch me, now,” he said.

Nea liked the way his voice echoed inside the jacket. The smell of the leather and his personal scent were more than enough to calm her. The dark warmth made her feel secure. She curled up and purred. Before she knew it, he was hopping to the ground and unzipping enough to get a good look at her by the light of the full moon.

He reached in, felt her neck, ran his fingers the length of her belly. Outside the jacket, his arm cradled her to his body, making her feel more secure. Satisfied with his brief examination, he scratched her throat and rubbed her cheeks. “You sure are a beautiful little thing. But what am I going to do with you? I can’t keep you where I live, but I might get away with putting you up for a bit. ‘Til I can find who you belong to.”

She snuggled deeper into his jacket as he began walking off.

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He was quiet slipping into the dorm, and even more so getting into his room. Snores from the opposite bed told her that someone else lived here and would not be disturbing them if they were quiet. After flipping on a small reading light, he pulled her out of his jacket and set her on the floor with a whispered admonition not to ‘make a mess’ on the floor while he looked for a box. He began rooting through some small boxes on the desks, looking for one he could empty and Nea turned her nose to the bed. She liked the smells there and hopped up onto it.

She explored the narrow, neatly made bed, found the feather pillow and curled up on it.

He turned around with a towel in a box and chuckled to see the cat on his pillow, her fluffy tail covering her little black nose. “Um, I don’t think so, little miss,” he said, picking her up and putting her into the box. “Your bed is here for now.”

He set the box beside the bed and changed into a pair of flannel pajamas quickly in the cool room then crawled between the covers. Nea sat in the box on the floor. The towel was thin but smelled nicely of him, but otherwise the box was just not warm enough. She jumped from the box to the bed, creeping over to him, sniffing cautiously. He turned over, looked into her amber eyes. She blinked. His eyes were blue at the centre and brown at the edges. *Him,* she thought.

“You’re not going to sleep in the box, are you?”

Her answer was to snuggle into his neck, purring.

“What are you thinking, Thomas,” he sighed. “She’s a cat. She’ll sleep where she wants to. Well come on then,” he said, settling on his side.

She curled up with her back against his chest and her head on his arm where it stuck out from under his pillow. He laid his hand on her back and the two of them fell asleep to her purring.



Nea felt cold. The temperature in the room was way too low. She reached instinctively for the covers behind her to pull them over her and felt something under it larger and warmer than a cat. At the same time, Thomas snuggled tighter against her, his arm pulling her in towards him and suddenly realized what he was holding was not small and furry. They opened their eyes in the darkness. The room was pitch black, the faint red glowing towel that covered the alarm clock’s obnoxious digital read-out was useless for determining details of the chamber. Thomas realized the identity of the soft, fleshy shelf above his hand beneath soft

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wool flannel and bolted. In that same instant, Nea felt the hand lean upwards, pressing lightly under her breasts and rolled out of the bed. When her feet hit the floor she noticed she was still wearing her mukluks.

She took a moment to assess her situation. She was in a strange, pitch-dark room, occupied by two unknown men, one of whom was snoring behind her. She was wearing a flannel shirt that came to her thighs, probably the one she had worn to bed, her shoes and nothing else. Her thighs were dry. She did not feel uncomfortable below and she had been on top of the covers where she was certain he had been under them.

Thomas pressed himself against the corner between the wall and his headboard, his mind racing. What was now standing in the middle of his room was definitely a girl, and only half dressed judging by what had brushed his hands as they moved away from each other. The question was who was she and how did she get in his room. Not to mention why she was in his bed. There was no way it was a sorority girl who had gotten drunk and fell asleep in the wrong room. He had locked the door. He heard her heavy, panicked breathing and knew she was as confused as he was. She was also backing up and judging from where he heard her land and the direction she was moving, she was about to hit something that would make an awful lot of noise. Suddenly all the questions in his head took a back seat to the need to wake no one and sneak her out.

“Don’t move,” he whispered.

She froze. Not because he said to, but because she recognized the voice: Dragon-eyes. Her mind suddenly suggested another name: Thomas.

She stopped. He breathed a sigh of relief. He got up, yanked on his pants over his pajamas and then flipped on the reading light. His heart stopped. It was *her*, standing here, in his room, in nothing but a shirt and boots. Never mind how she got here. She was *here*.

He forced himself to move, pulling his eyes from her face and turning to his dresser. He paused to peek under the clock towel. It was 4:45. They had maybe a half hour before people started to stir. He pulled a pair of his own pants out of a drawer and backed to her, holding them out behind him. He stood there, waiting, listening as she pulled them on, waiting ‘til he heard the zipper before turning around. He went to the closet and pulled out his only other coat: a well-worn army flight jacket, lined with sheepskin. He handed this to her, grabbed his own bomber jacket and threw on some shoes over the socks he had worn to bed.

He went to the door and cracked it open. The sudden light from outside was

blinding, but the coast was clear. He took her hand, which seemed to burn his the moment he touched it, sending jolts of electricity through his body, and led her out into the hall. He did not completely close the door, just set it halfway in the jamb so it wouldn't lock on him. They hurried down a couple halls to the side door and bolted down the emergency stairs as quickly and quietly as they could manage.

When they reached the door to the outside, he paused. "Where are we going?" he asked, looking out the window in the door to see if the coast was clear. It was still dark outside.

"We? You don't have to escort me all the way home," she said. "I'll be fine."

He set a hand on her arm. "Listen. Anything can happen between here and there, wherever there is."

"Just tell me where I *am*."

"Cather."

She nodded. "Randall's just two buildings away. I'll be fine. But we need to talk."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, no kidding. Um. When's your morning class let out?"

"About 11:00."

He thought a moment. "Meet me for lunch at 11:30, in the Union building courtyard." He paused, hearing a door close a few stories above them as someone entered the freezing stairwell for a morning cigarette. "Let me at least walk you to the front door," he whispered, opening the door to the outside.

She shook her head. "You're not dressed for the weather."

"Neither are you," he countered.

She smiled, "Yes, but I only have to go one way." With that she darted out into the pre-dawn darkness.

Thomas watched her go, his heart, now that it seemed to be beating again, was trying to escape his chest in any way possible. He watched until she disappeared into the darkness of the Green before he closed the door. Shivering, he went back upstairs to bed, but sleep had abandoned him.

Nea managed to get back into the dorm without a great deal of trouble. A boy was sneaking out the side door and let her in. She slipped up the stairs to her room. Luckily the door was unlocked. As the light from the hall fell on her bed Gaganan lifted his head from the pillow, blinked, glanced above him to the clock. *Cutting it a bit close tonight, aren't we? How'd your flying lessons go?*

She stood there a moment, unable to speak. Her mind was racing with what he

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just said. She put her fists on her hips and glared at him. If she had a tail it would have been lashing and he instantly realized something was wrong. **Flying lessons?** she growled.

Um, with Owl? he began. **And you are not...**

Not what? she seethed when he did not continue.

... sleeping? he offered feebly. **Whoa!** he yowled as she suddenly pounced on him and snatched him from the bed. She hauled him downstairs to the study room. It was not completely soundproofed, but insulated enough that she could yell if she wanted to without waking the whole dorm. “You *knew!*” she seethed, dropping him onto the table. She planted her hands on either side of him and met him eye for eye. He took a step back, having never seen her this livid, not at him.

Of course I knew, he said. **I was doing it!**

“Doing *what* exactly?”

At this point he sat up, curling his tail around his forepaws. **Teaching you as I was instructed to.**

“Teaching me what?”

To remember. To shift. To shape yourself into that which you once were. Your soul still remembers. It is your body I have to teach.

She sank into the nearest chair. “Why? Why did you have to do it at night, keeping me up all night. I may be failing my classes now because of this,” she said, burying her head in her hands. She noticed that her hair was still in braids. In fact, she was still wearing the braid wraps she was the day before.

He crossed to her, licking her forehead. **Because, that is how Crow said I had to do it. You remember beyond this body best when you are dreaming.**

“Hypnosis,” she said.

I do not make you bock like a chicken, he frowned.

“No, but you make me meow like a cat, and hoot like an owl.”

He sighed. **If you choose to see it that way. It is only when you sleep that I can speak to that part of your soul which remembers. You don’t actually *speak* to animals, you know. You merely understand our souls.**

Her head came up. “Really? So why are birds so hard to understand? Or are they actually that dumb?”

That’s debatable, but... you were only a bird maybe once, I think. The last thing you were before this body was a crow. Snakes... you never were a reptile, which is why their souls are alien to you. He tipped his head to look into her eyes. **I didn’t want to do this to you. Not now. Crow said I had to. Eagle’s word,** he

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swore, holding up a paw. *I told him it was unfair to you, but I had no choice. He was angry I did not push you harder. I told him to go stuff himself. I'd do it my way or he could do it himself. As a result, the spiteful thing has been harassing me while I sleep during the day. I finally had to get Puma to teach him some patience.*

She reached up and stroked his head. "Does this mean I can sleep now?"

He sighed, licked her nose. *I'm afraid not. You can't do it at will yet. When you can shift waking... then we can stop. But I think it might be better from now on, if I do not trance you again before morning.*

"Trance me?"

It kept you from remembering. Made you think it was a dream. It is a cat thing, dreaming. You have been actively dreaming since the New Year. Now, where were you last night? I came back to get you and Owl said you fell and were carried off.

"And so you were so worried you went back to the room and went back to sleep," she glared.

He chuckled. *She said a boy carried you off. Hummingbird said to leave you, that you'd be home before dawn. Soooo...* he prompted.

Nea rolled her eyes and filled him in.

He smells nice at least, he commented, sniffing the jacket as she carried him back to the room.

Nea sighed dreamily. "Tell me about it."



Nea managed to *not* fall asleep in History that morning unlike Wednesday, but not without difficulty. She was able to follow very little of what the instructor said, managed to write down the wrong chapter numbers for homework. Her eyes were burning and her body ached all over. Her forefinger was especially sore, and the nail was badly torn. If she thought hard about it, she could remember it being the only thing keeping her from hitting the ground at a high velocity. Before she knew it, class was over and she was heading towards the Student Union with an extra bar of pemmican in her bag and two bottles of a Ginkgo tea.

She found herself a bench against a wall in a quiet, but conspicuous area and waited. Just after 11:30 Thomas dropped onto it beside her. After waiting all morning, nervously wondering what they would say to each other, suddenly neither had the slightest clue what to say. Numbly, she handed him a cloth bag in which she

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had his jacket and jeans. "Thank you," she said softly. "For everything."

He accepted the bag, held it uncertainly for a moment.

"I'm still not quite sure what happened," he answered, tying the strings of the bag to his backpack and making sure it was secure. "I mean... the whys aside I'm still stumped by the hows."

"Why don't you tell me what happened last night," she suggested, leaning back.

"Is here really the best place for this?" he asked, looking around at the milling students.

"You're right. Let's go to the Green. Not as many people out there today. Though I've been told to expect a Chinook sometime later."

"Really?" he exclaimed, gathering his pack and following her. She only nodded. As they walked, he told her what had happened the night before. "I went for a walk after work. I work the dinner shift at the Cafeteria," he added. "On my way back to the dorm I heard this cat yowling in a tree." As he filled her in on what progressed from there he felt his cheeks flush for a reason he could not explain; a thought occurring to him that could not be possible. "And you?" he asked when he was finished.

"I was dreaming."

"Sleepwalking," he nodded, setting his things down at the base of a tree, and spreading a blanket from his pack. "Wait, that doesn't explain how you got into a locked room."

She sighed, looked him over carefully. Somewhere on the wind, she thought she heard the distant wicker of a horse. She decided to tell him. Everything. "What do you know of the First Nations?"

He sat back. "More than most, less than some. I'm friends with an Ojibwe named Redbird."

She nodded. "I am acquainted with him. He is Bear Clan."

"I stayed with his people for a summer," he went on. "I'm studying to be a cultural anthropologist and I'm most interested in the long term development of the Nations themselves. Not just as they interacted with the Europeans, but with each other. I understand some tribes are splinters of others. I want to study the development of the cultures from their arrival on the continent 'til now, that sort of thing. Why?"

As a distant church bell tolled noon, her stomach rumbled. She pulled the pemmican and tea out of her bag and handed him one of each. He thanked her and nibbled, ready to listen. "Have you ever heard of the Mainganoden?" she asked as

she struggled to open the tea bottle.

He reached over and took it from her, popping the lid easily and handing it back. “Redbird mentioned it, but he said it was their secret to keep. He did say that your people come from a place called Zooneawagini Majiwe, the Silver Rose Mountain, but would not tell me more.”

“Do you believe in magic?”

He chuckled. “Are you kidding?” One look at her face and he knew she was not. “Well, I know there is a great deal out there that is unexplained and perhaps currently unexplainable any other way. I suppose... I suppose it’s possible.”

She leaned back against the tree, letting the words flow out of her. Thinking was difficult, so it was best not to try. “The Aztecs and the Mayans had incredible calendars,” she explained. “They were more advanced than any of the Northern tribes. They knew great magic as well as great science. They predicted that magic itself would wax and wane by ages. In fact, once Christians came into the picture, they began to destroy every magic thing they could that was not associated with God. When they got here... they tried to do it to us too. But we were warned. We hid our magic.” She watched him a moment. He was taking all this in like any anthropologist would, fascinated, eager for the insight of belief, not judging her for believing it. “The Mainganoden had more magic people than other tribes, because of our charge, and we are protected by the same, therefore we were the best choice to take in the magic of the others. We still have unbroken Mainganoden lines, but we adopt the children of other tribes, bring them to the mountain and teach them.”

“Teach them what?”

“How to discover their own inner magic. How to use what they find, and more importantly, how to protect and hide it. When they are ready, they often return to their own people to become great medicine people. Not everyone in the other Nations know of us. Not all can be trusted. But those that need to know do, and when a magic child is born things are explained to the parents. The plan is to hide our magic until the white man accepts it among his own. Only then will we be safe.”

“That is fascinating,” he said, finishing his pemmican. “So you used magic to enter my room. New question: Why? And why did you seem as startled as I was by the situation?”

She sighed. “I *am* magic, but I cannot *wield* it. I am no Wonder Worker. My best friend, Memenqwa is, but I am not. I simply *am*. I am a Speaker.”

“What is a Speaker?”

Gaganan walked up, head butted Nea. *So this is him?*

The Speaker

“Good afternoon, sleepyhead,” she smiled. “Gaganan, this is ...” she blinked, stopping herself before she said the name on the tip of her tongue.

“I’m Thomas Harlan,” he said, suddenly holding his hand out to her.

She smiled softly, shook it. “Yes, we... kind of didn’t get around to that did we? Sooneawa Majiwe, but everybody calls me Nea.”

Gaganan thumped his tail, glancing pointedly away, coughing lightly.

“Sorry, I got sidetracked. Gaganan, Thomas Harlan. Thomas, Gaganan, my Niiji Manidoo.”

“Spirit... friend?” he translated.

She smiled. “You speak Ojibwe?”

He shrugged, “Only marginally. I’m rusty and there is a lot I don’t know, but I’m learning. Can’t read it yet, though,” he said, holding out his hand for the cat to sniff. Gaganan startled him by setting his paw on it instead. He shook the paw with raised eyebrows. “Er, hello to you, too. He’s um, very well trained,” he commented.

She smiled. “He’s enhanced actually. Magically. Certain children are given an infant animal when they are six years old. They are spiritually bound to this animal. This animal is their companion, their bridge to the world of spirits. This connection always allows them to communicate with each other. And while the animal is still subject to his own personality and nature, he becomes more aware and in tune with his surroundings and subsequently smarter than your average specimen.”

“Smarter than your average cat,” he grinned, stroking the cheek fur when Gaganan allowed him to.

Nea watched him carefully. “He can read.”

Thomas was startled by the revelation. He practically jumped when another nearby voice spoke.

“Can I get one of those?” asked Hecuba, coming around the tree.

Nea looked up, laughed. “A Niiji?”

“No, an introduction. Then I’ll be on my merry way and leave you two alone.”

“Thomas Harlan, Hecuba Halstead.” They shook hands. “She’s down the hall from me.”

“Pleased,” Thomas said.

“You have no idea,” Hecuba chuckled. “But I am thrilled to meet you. Well, I’ll leave you two alone. I have no idea why Gaganan wanted me out here.”

Nea looked from the cat to her friend. “Wait, he dragged you out here?”

Gaganan suddenly began washing his foot.

“Told me himself. Was most insistent.”

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“How?”

“Spirit board. You look worn out,” she commented.

“Wait, you’re saying the cat used a Ouija board to ask you to come find Nea?” Thomas said, confused.

Hecuba laughed. “Yes, I am. She just said he can read. He just can’t write. He doesn’t have the digits,” she said wiggling her fingers. “So, you going to tell me why you’re filling him in? Not that it’s any of my business.”

Nea moved her feet. “Have a seat. I may need your input.”

Hecuba dropped onto the blanket. “Talk,” she said.

“Actually, I’m done talking for a bit. Thomas, why don’t you tell her what happened last night and this morning and see if she can figure out how things occurred.”

Thomas looked at her. “Is it safe?”

“I trust her. I’ve already told her I’m a Speaker.”

“Something you haven’t explained to me yet,” he sighed, finishing his drink.

“She can talk to animals,” Hecuba said. “And it’s ok. I know. I’m a Green Witch.”

He stopped, his hand on the cap of the bottle. “Seriously?”

“As a heart attack,” Hecuba smiled.

He decided it was better to just go with the flow. “All right. I’ll work with that premise. But she already told me all children with Spirit ...companions,” he said, correcting his earlier mistranslation, “can speak with their animals.”

“Not just him,” Hecuba explained. “*All* animals.”

“Except reptiles,” Nea injected, snuggling into her coat.

“Right, except reptiles.”

Thomas looked at her, “Why not reptiles?”

“Cause I never was one.” She gestured for them to continue.

Hecuba took a mental note to ask about that later, as did Thomas.

He explained what had happened. Hecuba began grinning at once. Nea just leaned back against the tree tiredly watching the pair of them. Hecuba’s eyes swept over her. “Wow. I’m... I’m *impressed*. You finally found your outlet, and man what an outlet!”

Nea just smiled.

“What? What am I missing?” Thomas asked, looking from the tired grin on Nea’s face to Hecuba’s delighted one.

Hecuba looked him over, studying him very carefully.

He felt her eyes seem to bore through him.

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“You have got to be the most insensitive man I have ever met,” she laughed.

Thomas flushed, offended. His mouth worked uselessly, trying to think of something to say, to express indignation and ...whatever else he was feeling. He tried to be very sensitive to the needs of others.

Hecuba just laughed harder, patting him on the shoulder. “Not that way, hon. I meant insensitive to the supernatural.”

Thomas took a deep breath, suddenly relieved.

“Hon?” asked Nea.

It was Hecuba’s turn to blush. “I have two classes a day with Julia. She’s starting to rub off. My Southern accent is improving tremendously though. But seriously, Thomas, you are so mundane, your aura is practically non-existent.”

He wasn’t sure how to take that. “You going to explain this morning?”

“Oh, right, sorry. You are just fascinating. But think about it. What was in your room when you locked it? ...That normally wasn’t.”

“Just the cat,” he frowned.

“And what was in your room when you woke up that wasn’t supposed to be?” she prompted, grinning like a bobcat.

“Her,” he said, pointing to Nea. She only smiled, her eyes closed.

“And you are so mundane that you cannot put two and two together?” Hecuba chuckled.

“You’re saying she’s a were-cat?” he said flatly.

Hecuba dropped her head with a sigh. “Well, there was a nearly full moon last night,” she sighed. “Close enough.”

“Only problem with that theory, Thomas,” Nea said, “Is that I was an owl when I fell, becoming a cat to save myself. I’ve been in training to reshape since New Year’s.”

It’s called being a Shaper, and you need to write to Spider and ask her about it.

“I’ll do that,” she told the cat.

“So you’ve been learning to do this and didn’t tell me?” Hecuba complained.

Nea shook her head. “I didn’t even know.” She pointed to the cat. “He’s been teaching me... in my sleep. He’s been hypnotizing me so it would be easier and I wouldn’t remember.”

“That explains the sleeping without getting any rest. Well good. Now maybe you can sleep.”

The Speaker

Thomas felt his head reeling, trying to take all this in. In the distance he heard the church bells tolling one o'clock. He jumped up, held out his hand to Nea. "We need to go. We're going to be late."

Nea looked at the hand a moment. He wasn't rejecting her wholesale for the revelation. She accepted the hand, allowed him to pull her to her feet. Their eyes met, seemed to take forever to pull away.

Hecuba looked to the cat, grinning. He winked at her. She picked up the tea bottles and quietly left, dropping them in the trash as she went.

Thomas hurriedly picked up the blanket, snapping it to shake off the dirt and folded it up, putting it away. The two of them raced across the campus to the building their class was in, and managed to arrive just in time. Professor Jameson had just set his brief case down and students were still filing down the steps to get to their seats. "Looks like a lot of people are late," Thomas chuckled.

Nea barely heard him or the person behind him answer, "The previous class ran over." Her ears were ringing, her head was throbbing, her eyes were burning and her sight not quite clear. The run to class had taken whatever energy reserves she had had left. The muscle aches were quickly worsening. The room slowly went black.

Thomas turned from the person behind them to comment to Nea when he saw her begin to fold up like a marionette whose strings had been cut. He nearly slipped himself as he grabbed her and leaned back to keep her from falling head first down the metal edged concrete stairs.

From the floor of the mini amphitheatre, Jameson looked up to see a cluster of students balling up halfway down the steps. "What is the hold up, people? We're late enough thanks to Windbag Winston."

"*Professor!*" shouted Thomas. "Call an ambulance! *Move* it people, give her some air!" he demanded. All but two people obeyed, one was taking both his bags and hers, the other was helping to keep them both from falling farther.

Jameson came to the rail that separated him from the students. When the congestion cleared and he could see Thomas sitting on the steps cradling an unconscious girl, he vaulted the rail and charged toward them.

A nearby student was on a cell phone, watching the drama with interest. "I don't know, man, she just folded up like a broken doll. Did you..."

The professor pointed at him. "*You* hang up and call rescue."

Before the young man could do so, the person on the other end clicked off. He sighed and dialled.

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Thomas's mind raced, trying to remember what Nea and her friend had been saying. "I think it might be exhaustion," he said. "Her neighbour said she wasn't getting enough sleep lately. Pulling all-nighters, I think."

The professor nodded. "Let's get her up and into the hallway. Make it easier for them to extract her. They're not getting a gurney down here."

Thomas heard the student on the cell phone. "Yes, we've had a girl faint in class. She's still unconscious. ... Five seven, about one-twenty, 18. ... In'jun."

Thomas looked up and glared at Tolby who glared right back. Tolby mouthed to him, "You were warned."

The ambulance came quickly, taking her to the small hospital in town. The hospital was not very big, maybe twelve beds in the whole facility and served as a teaching hospital for the med-students at Cordell and as a clinic for the community. With a population of less than four thousand, they rarely had overnight patients. It was a place to 'intern' before going on to a real internship elsewhere. If she was seriously ill, they might even transfer her to Calgary. Thomas wanted to go with her, but, not being family, they would not allow it.

Thomas did not even remember what happened in class that afternoon. He carried his books and Nea's while his feet automatically took him to work where he helped prepare food and clean up afterwards for dinner. It was not until he was carrying a bin of creamed corn to the serving line that it occurred to him. The girl he had met that afternoon would know Nea's roommate who would know who to contact family wise, and at least he could get information or her things to her.

He began taking frequent peeks into the dining area, looking for the Goth-chick. Finally, he saw her sitting down with a red-headed girl wearing heavier clothes than most people. He snatched up Nea's things from his locker, told his boss he was going to take a short break and headed out into the dining room.

Julia looked up with surprise to see the handsome young man coming to join them, and even more so when Hecuba grinned and made room for him. "She's not here yet," Hecuba smiled. "But you're welcome to wait." She saw the grim look on his face and her smile faded.

"She's not coming," Thomas said flatly. "I need to find her roommate."

Hecuba paled, held her hand toward Julia. "Thomas, Nea's roommate, Julia Divot. Julia, Thomas Harlan."

Julia frowned as his attention turned to her.

"Look." He set the bag on the table and slid it to Julia. "These are her things. She collapsed in Jameson's class and they took her to the hospital. I've got to find

out what's going on.”

“What?” both girls exclaimed at once.

Hecuba dropped her fork and picked up her tray, her food half eaten.

“Where are you going?” Julia asked.

“To go see Gaganan, then to see Nea,” she said, emptying her tray in the trash.

“Please, I have to know what's going on.”

Hecuba pulled out a pen and a small pad and handed it to him. “What's your number. I'll call you when I've seen her.”

“If you call before 9 I'll be here,” he said, writing one number. “After 9:10 I'll be here,” he said, writing his room number. “You can leave a message with Henry if he answers. I trust him.”

Julia wolfed down what she could of her food and grabbed what she could carry. She shouldered Nea's pack as well as her own and trailed Hecuba out of the cafeteria. “Who was he?” she asked.

“Camellia.”

Returning to the dorm, Hecuba stopped in her room to drop her belongings and grab her spirit board. Jenny was home and asked her what the hurry was. “Nea's in the hospital,” she answered and headed down to Nea's room.

Julia watched, confused, as Hecuba set the board on the floor and took out a pad and pen. Gaganan hopped off the bed and sat before the board, hurriedly spelling out: “Wht going on? Smething is wrng.”

Hecuba filled him in on what Thomas had said. Gaganan took it in fairly calmly, though he growled over his shoulder at some invisible thing whose presence Hecuba could feel but not clearly see. He spelled out a phone number. “Someone always at centre. Will answer phone. Tell them. They will tell you what to do.”

She tore the number off and handed it to Julia. “Here, call this and tell them what's going on. See if they can get up here.”

She turned back to the board while Julia went downstairs to make the phone call. As soon as Gaganan had her attention, he began spelling again. “Must go to her now. Never slept without me. Must not sleep without me.”

“They will not let you in. The hospital has a strict no animal policy,” Hecuba warned him.

“Irrelevant. Must not be allowed. Never alone, never at night.”

“But she slept without you last night,” she commented, confused.

“Not same. Was with Medicine Hat. It will not touch her while the boy is with her.”

The Speaker

“What won’t touch her?” she frowned, getting worried.

“It,” was all he would say. Suddenly he jerked his paw from the pointer as if it had shocked him. The pointer began to move on its own.

Nindayaa majiwe. Wiin ne. Nindizhinikaaz gaawiin bigaagii, gaazhagens.

Gaganan hissed and backed up.

Hecuba felt a chill run down her spine. After the pointer remained still for some time, the cat crept closer to the board, tentatively touched the pointer. When he was convinced it would not move again on its own he translated the words. “I am the mountain. She is mine. My name will not be spoken here, cat.”

Hecuba swallowed. The animal looked up at her with pleading eyes.

“You have to help me. I must get to her.”

Julia entered the room. “Ok, I got a hold of someone named Two Buck, and they said the hospital already called. Apparently they got her information from the Registrar, or maybe her wallet. Anyway, they’ve sent some people up already and they should be here shortly. It’s only a four hour flight by puddle-jumper and I think someone in town owes them for something, so they’re being flown over.”

Hecuba got up and went to the room phone. She dialed a friend of hers from the theatre. “Darwin,” she said without preamble. “I need your car.”



Mirja was the on-duty nurse when the girl was brought in. She loved her job. It was nowhere near as stressful and hectic as her last one had been in Edmonton. It was quiet here and the people were nicer. She saw a lot of college kids here. The exhaustion case she was just brought was a little out of season, but she could deal with it easily enough. The signs were obvious. Lord knows they saw enough of it come mid-terms and finals. The doctor had glanced her over and agreed with Mirja’s prognosis.

She was humming away at the nurse’s station, working on the charts of the only three patients in the hospital that afternoon when she looked up into the most fascinating blue eyes she had ever seen. He was incredibly handsome, deep golden tan and bright golden hair and he was smiling at her as he leaned on her counter. “Can I help you?” she asked, her heart pounding in her chest. It was most inappropriate, she thought. He was barely into his twenties.

“I certainly hope so,” he said, a sadness touching his face. It was then she noticed the vase overloaded with roses next to him. “My girlfriend was brought in

here this afternoon and I would like to see her.”

“What is her name?”

“Majiwe,” he said.

“Oh, the First Nations girl. Yes. But I’m afraid seeing her won’t do you a whole lot of good. She’s unconscious and likely to remain so for a while,” she answered, glancing at the monitor below her counter that reported the vitals of that room.

“She’s... not seriously hurt is she?” he asked. “No one could tell me anything. I only just found out.”

“Well, she’s just suffering from exhaustion. We see a lot of that later in the year. She just has to sleep it off. There are no injuries. I’d be happy to put those in her room for you. I can’t let you in, because her family hasn’t arrived yet.”

“Well,” he hesitated. “I’d kind of like to leave them myself. To be there when she does wake. I’m hoping to change our status you see.” He pulled a box out of his pocket and opened it.

Inside, Mirja saw the most beautiful engagement ring she had ever seen. She gasped. “My, what a lucky girl. That diamond is beautiful!”

Jonah closed the box. “So you understand why I have to take them myself. I... I want to leave a note, put it on her hand if I could. I promise, I won’t stay long,” he added quickly as she seemed reluctant still. “I’ll just leave you my card so you can call me when she wakes.”

“Oh, all right. She’s in here,” she sighed, her heart still fluttering like a schoolgirl.

She led him down the hall to the young woman’s room and let him in. “But only five minutes, mind you.”

“I promise,” he beamed.

The moment the door closed he crossed to the bed. He set the roses on the table and placed them near enough the fragrance could reach her. He pulled the ring from the box and slid it on her finger, then off again, slipped the plain copper band back into his pocket. He took a comb out of the same pocket and unfastened her braids, tossing the wraps carelessly onto the nightstand. He laid a cloth on her chest and then began to comb out her hair with great care. He collected the hairs that clung to the comb and laid the long black strands on the cloth. Finally, he plucked a petal from one of the roses and wiped it over her forehead, her eyelids and then her lips. He set this with the hairs on the cloth, folding it up and putting it and the comb very carefully back into his pocket.

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He started to leave, then paused to touch her, to feel that which drew him so strongly. He kissed her, was amused when she stirred in her sleep and tried to pull away. He chuckled as he left, put on his most wounded face and gave a resigned smile to the nurse as he left the hospital. He walked to his car patting his pocket with satisfaction.



As Hecuba and Julia pulled in to the hospital lot, they were almost sideswiped by a silver luxury model. They found a parking space that would hold the passion pink vintage VW bug and slid into it. Gaganan got out with them and sat on the trunk. “Ok,” Hecuba told him. “The whole facility is only two floors. They most likely have her on the second floor. There is a tree on the corner that way. If you climb it, you should be able to get to the ledge that runs around the whole second floor. See if you can find her room. Once we get in, I’ll open the window. We’ll find a way to hide you once inside.”

He nodded and dashed off for the tree. The limbs were easy enough to scale, and he was on the ledge in short order. He smelled strong evidence of pigeons, but none were present. He paused at each window, peeking in. He found her on the far side and sat at the sill, leaning his head against the pane watching her. He looked for signs of the other, but it was not there. He curled up, covering his paws with his tail and fluffing up against the wind while he waited.



Hecuba and Julia were a little put out that the nurse would not let them in to see Nea.

“But I’m her roommate!” Julia insisted. “I have her things!”

“I’m sorry. You’ll have to wait for her family,” Mirja insisted gently. “Hospital policy. Until I have contradictory instructions from them, I can’t let anyone in.”

“But, she has no family,” Julia continued. “She’s an orphan.”

“No. I talked to her family this afternoon. Her uncle will be here in...” she glanced at her watch, “well any minute now. Or so they said. I talked to her grandfather myself. Such a nice man.”

The Speaker

Hecuba set a hand on Julia's shoulder. "Can you at least tell us what room she's in? That way we can let her friends know where to send flowers and such?"

Mirja sighed, "That I can do. She's in 206. There's a waiting room just at the head of the hall you came down from the elevator. You'll be able to see the family arrive from there. There's a phone in there. Just dial nine to get out. And no cell phones, please."

Hecuba nodded and led Julia down to the waiting room. Julia saw the snack machine and went for it, not having had enough to eat at dinner. Hecuba sat beside the phone and began to dial the cafeteria. She asked for Thomas and told him what room Nea was in. She hung up and took out a script and began to study her lines; glancing up frequently to the doorway, watching for anyone coming out of the elevators.



Thomas begged off the rest of work and headed across the campus towards the lot where he kept his car parked. He wove through the cars parked in the large walled lot, some of which had not been moved for so long there was snow mounded around their tires. At the very back corner was his old, beat up Pinto. As he climbed into the front seat, he noticed something on his windshield. He stepped out, reaching over to pull it off, thinking it just a piece of trash that had gotten blown into the corner. What he grabbed was a feather. It was a good nine inches long and in decent condition, though it needed a little stroking of the vane to smooth it out. By his guess, it was a swan feather, though there had been no swans, to his knowledge, in the area since November, nor would there be until nearly April. He sat in the car, turning the feather in his fingers and suddenly knew what he was going to do with it. He was going to the hospital, but first, he had a stop to make.

CHAPTER TEN:

The Beauty Sleeping

Thomas got off the elevator on the second floor and headed straight for the nurse's station. It was empty. Whoever was on duty was in a room down the hall answering a call button. That was fine. He knew where Nea was. Quickly and quietly he went straight to 206 and peeked in the window. There was no one else in there yet. He slipped inside, closing the door behind him.

Nea lay on the bed, her arms by her sides over the covers. IV tubing ran from the far side of her up to the bottles at the head of the bed. Beside her a monitor beeped, keeping tabs on her blood pressure and oxygen levels. Her hair was loose, had been combed over her shoulders to her waist. She should have been peaceful, even in this state, but she was not. She made small noises, shifted restlessly, as if her dreams plagued her or she was in pain. Seeing her this way made his heart surge, making things appear worse than they had to be.

He crossed to the bed, dropped the camellias in his hand onto the tray table. He pulled up the chair and took her hand in his, pressing it to his lips. She stirred in his direction, but did not wake. She was suddenly calm. He pressed the back of his fingers to her cheek and she moved against them. The manner was almost feline and made him chuckle. "Ah, kitten," he sighed. "What am I going to do? I love you, you know. I don't know you, but I love you. You have such fire, it kills me to see it quenched like this."

The Speaker

He took her hand in both of his and pressed it to his forehead. “My silver angel,” he breathed. “I won’t lose you like this. Not just when I found you. I don’t know about this magic business, but I don’t care. You could tell me you turn into a monstrous man-eating slug and I think I would love you still.”

He heard noises outside, near the nurse’s station: People talking. He pulled the feather out of his coat. He kissed the snow white vane before he slid it into her hand. “It’s not an eagle feather, but it is for you, to keep me near you. I will be back.”

He tore himself from her side, headed for the door. He peered out the window; saw Julia and Hecuba talking with the nurse and three First Nations people he did not know. He used the distraction to slip out of the room and down to the elevators. Hecuba only gave him a sidelong glance, but smiled.

Julia was grinning from ear to ear as she introduced herself to the three natives. “I’m Nea’s roommate, Julia Divot.”

“Johnny Southbend,” said the taller man. “These are my nephew Tuwe,” he said putting his hand on the young man’s head, “And his fiancé Memenqwa.”

“Meme!” said Hecuba excitedly, extending her hand to her immediately. “I’m Hecuba. I don’t know if Nea has mentioned me, but we *so* need to talk. I’ve seen your handiwork and I must say very nice.”

“My handiwork?” she smiled suspiciously.

“Nea’s told me almost everything. I love how you did her hair last year,” she added, pointedly twisting a temple lock of hair around her finger.

“Excuse me,” said the nurse. “But, your relationship please?”

Johnny flashed her his best smile. “Uncle, cousins,” he said.

Mirja sighed, handing him a clipboard with papers to take care of. “Sign here then. You can go in but do *not* wake her up. She’s been a little restless. I may discuss sleep aids with the doctor when he comes in, something to make her sleep more peacefully. If she doesn’t improve we’ll have to send her to Edmonton for a sleep study.”

“Oh, I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” smiled Johnny. “Meme, why don’t you and Tuwe go in and see her. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Hecuba and Julia started to follow them, but Johnny called Julia back. “Miss Divot, would you wait with me a moment? Fill me in on what’s been going on?”

“Uh... shore, Mr. Southbend,” she answered. She watched the others go in to see Nea with a bit of envy.

The Speaker

Once they were in the room, Meme turned on Hecuba. “Exactly what did she tell you?” she demanded, though she kept her voice low.

Hecuba ignored her for a second and went straight to the window, opening it. “Sorry, it took so long, Gaganan. But the ‘cop’ at the desk wouldn’t let us in here until now.”

Gaganan shook himself off outside then quickly slipped into the warm room. He butted his head against her hand in thanks and forgiveness and headed straight for Nea’s bed.

Hecuba looked over to Meme who was standing with her mouth open. “Enough to know why I had to sneak the cat in here somehow,” she explained. She glanced over at where Tuwe stood with his eyes closed over Nea, apparently asleep. She jerked her thumb in his direction in question. Meme waved her hand dismissively, nodding. “I’m a Green Witch. I had to redo your handiwork with the witch lock just after Christmas.”

“Very nice work, by the way,” said Tuwe, opening his eyes. He began to braid Nea’s hair again, a meticulous six strand weave.

“Thank you. Gaganan, you’ll have to keep alert for people coming in, but I think you can hide in here when you need to,” Hecuba said, opening an empty cabinet under the nightstand where only a bible and a phone book were kept.

“Wow,” Meme commented, spying the roses. “That’s ...extravagant. There’s what, three dozen there?”

Tuwe didn’t even look up from his braiding. “Pitch them. Somewhere other than here. Give them away. They won’t harm anyone else.”

“Are you saying they’re harmful to her?” Meme glared. He only nodded.

“She’s got a stalker,” Hecuba said. “A man who’s been sending her roses and won’t take no for an answer. Something about him bothers me, if you know what I mean.” She took a moment to fill them in on what had been happening.

Out in the hall, Johnny had finished with the paperwork and taken Julia to the empty waiting room. “Now, my dear. I need to know a few things. Why did my niece collapse?”

“First of all, why did you say you were her uncle? She told me she was an orphan with no family left but an aunt who didn’t want her,” she said with her arms folded, glaring at him.

Johnny chuckled. “Because she belongs to the tribe. We are *all* her family now. But the government does not accept this. White hospitals will not allow this for responsibility. I was chosen by the Council to speak for her in this matter. She lived

The Speaker

with me for a while, as she has with most of the tribe on the reservation. ‘Uncle’ appeases the hospital and is less than a lie if you look at it from the right angle. Now, why did my niece collapse?”

Satisfied, Julia told him. “Well, she’s been sleeping, but behaving like she hasn’t slept at all. Ever since New Year’s. She’s out cold when I go to bed and often when I get up, so she’s been sleeping. I don’t understand it at all.”

“All right. I need to know where her cat is.”

Julia ducked out into the hall, making sure no one was near enough to possibly overhear. “He should be in the room by now. Hec and I made shore her Manidoo was brought to her. I don’t know why, but I know it’s important.”

“Do you now?” His normally laughing eyes were serious and suspicious. “Who else knows?”

“Only Hecuba and myself. We’re good at keeping secrets. Hec’s got one of her own. So don’t worry, sir. We’ve shared pipe. I’ll keep her faith.”

“Hmmm,” he nodded, still not one hundred percent sure about all this. “Let’s go see her.”

By the time they entered the room, Tuwe had finished his braiding, having woven one of the Camellia blossoms by her ear. There were five more in a glass by the bed and a full bouquet of roses on the floor by the door. Tuwe did not turn from the window where he was drawing gecko patterns in the condensation. “One of the three of us must remain here with her,” he said.

“I agree, nephew. I’ll take the first watch. You and Meme call Redbird and have him come get you. Anang’s already said she’d put us up.”

Tuwe shook his head. “Not you, uncle. Raven. Me, Butterfly and Raven must watch.”

“Butterfly?” asked Julia.

Meme piped up. “That’s what my name means.”

“Ok, so then who’s Raven?”

Without looking Tuwe just pointed at Hecuba who seemed as startled as Julia and Johnny. “Tonight, Raven watches,” he said, finally looking at her. “If she doesn’t mind?”

Hecuba shook her head, “No, of course not. It must have been a long flight. You go get some rest. I don’t know what I’m protecting her from, but I’m sure the cat will let me know.”

Gaganan suddenly darted off the bed and vanished under it. They looked up to see the nurse coming in.

The Speaker

“Ok,” Mirja whispered. “You’ll have to leave now. It is way past visiting hours and she needs to sleep.”

Johnny took her aside. “It is our tribe’s way to watch over our ill. Someone close to her must be near her at all times.”

“One of you can stay the night. I have a recliner in the next room you can bring in. It’s too heavy for me to manage alone. Just make sure she sleeps undisturbed.”

Johnny smiled, nodding. “At night, it will be Tuwe, or Meme, or Miss Hecuba.”

“Hecuba?” she asked, looking over at the very non-Indian girl. “Why not yourself, sir?”

“I will watch by day, and have things I must do at night that cannot be done here. These three are very close to Nea, and Miss Hecuba knows of our ways and what is to be done,” he assured her.

Mirja looked sceptical. “There won’t be any smoking herbs or incense in here.”

“Oh, no, ma’am,” he laughed softly. “And no chanting either. We trust your medicine. If you say sleep is all she needs, then we respect that. We just wish to make sure she gets spiritual rest too. See how peaceful she sleeps now? You said she was restless before. Her spirit is unaccustomed to being alone when she sleeps. She has always had nightmares when she slept alone.”

Though still unsure, Mirja relented. “Very well. The rest of you must leave now. I’ll leave a note for the morning staff.”

Obediently, everyone but Hecuba filed out. Hecuba held Julia back for just a moment, while Johnny and Tuwe dragged the chair into the room, asking her to let Jenny know what was going on and for her not to worry about Princess. She then settled down into the recliner with a blanket, a reading light and her script.



About midnight, Mirja made her rounds. She had only three patients, so it did not take long. Her last was the Native girl, Majiwe, the one that had brought with her a host of strange activity since her arrival: A bizarre array of guests, family and fiancé: a bouquet of three dozen blood red roses within the hour of her admittance, then nothing until 7:30 when the two girls, who were total opposites, came to see her and had been told to wait. Then the family leaving the Goth to watch overnight and taking the roses away. Maybe being friends with a white was acceptable, but marrying one was not? She sighed. One had to be careful with some of the more

The Speaker

traditional tribesmen. Ignorance of tribal ways made offending them easy. She had wisely said nothing, not wishing them to know she had let the boy into the room.

The Goth, Miss Halstead, was asleep in the chair, an open copy of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* on her chest. Mirja carefully lifted the script from her, moving the bookmark to that page and set it on the tray near her. She pulled the covers up a little more then turned to her patient.

She checked the IV bag first, changing it for a fresh one. The girl was certainly more peaceful than she had been before her family arrived. She had turned on her side, curled up around some stuffed thing tucked under the blankets. Mirja picked up the hand without the IV in it to check her pulse and was startled when the stuffed thing moved. She pulled aside the blanket to reveal the largest tuxedo cat she had ever seen. The creature blinked up at her with wide eyes. It was lying against her side, head on the crook of her shoulder, its paws wrapped around her arm like some people curl around their pillows. It gave her a pitiful, pleading look, tightened its grip on the patient's arm and made a kitten-like noise.

"How in the world?" she whispered. She was certain that none of the visitors had brought anything with them large enough to conceal the animal, and she was equally confident it would never have walked in past security downstairs. Its appearance was a mystery. Its removal, a problem. The cat was huge, likely to be able to put up an incredible fight if she tried to remove it; a fight which could easily damage both her and the patient. Yet it could not be allowed to remain for sanitary reasons. She took a deep breath, smelled no trace of a box or a mess.

Her eyes flitted to the snow white fur of its belly as the cat half rolled onto its back, flashing it at her. Its eyes were still pleading with her. It looked so cute at that angle, so innocent and well-behaved, his fur so clean. She reached out and touched its throat, felt the thrumming purr beneath her fingers. The patient moved in her sleep, bent her head and rubbed her cheek against the top of the animal's head, at perfect peace with its presence. Mirja sighed, surrendering.

"All right, but only because kicking you out will cause more trouble than she needs right now." The cat blinked at her, seemed to smile as it continued its roll to snuggle against the patient's body. "All I have to say is, you'd better be gone by the time Dr. Killian gets here in the morning," she growled good-naturedly. She finished her duties, pulse and blood pressure, covered the cat back up and ran a finger over its head before she slipped out the door.



The Speaker

Early Sunday, Nea woke up. She blinked in the dim room. She lifted her hand to rub her face, pulled it away again as something soft yet stiff touched her cheek, nearly poked her eye. In her hand was a single, snow white feather. It was not one of hers. Her cases were on the table beside her, next to a glass with five camellias in full bloom. She felt a warm body nestled beside her shift and smiled, ruffled the fur. Gaganan blinked up at her, twisted his body right side up under the covers and grinned. *You're awake!*

She chuckled. *Yes. Want to tell me what I've missed?*

Gaganan took a couple minutes, crawled up towards her head, began licking her face while he told her everything. Suddenly he darted off the bed and into the bedside cabinet. A nurse came in to take readings, smiled seeing her awake.

“Welcome back to the world of the living. How are you feeling?”

“A little tired, but ready to get out of bed and do something.”

“Oh?” she said. “Like what?”

“Anything,” Nea sighed, which made both of them laugh.

“Well, it is six o'clock in the morning. The doctor will be in at eight, so you have a little while longer. Think you can stand it?” she smiled, taking her blood pressure.

“I'd really like a bath.”

“Alright.” The nurse finished up and started the bathwater. “Let me go tend to 209 and by then the water should be ready. I'll be back to help you in.”



By the time the doctor came in, Nea and Meme had caught up with each other. Nea had all the news from home and Meme was filled in on all the goings on in Alberta, including Nea's new little trick. Meme promised to talk to Spider the moment she got home. They shoed Gaganan out the window just before the doctor came in.

Two hours and a hundred tests later, Nea was discharged and sitting in a restaurant in Clarkstown with Julia, Hecuba, Tuwe, Meme, Johnny, Redbird and his wife. Surprisingly, Nea vaguely remembered Anang. Anang remembered her better, had been at the reservation when Nea's parents died.

“So, I suppose you're going on back to Zooneawagini Majiwe today?” Nea asked over dessert.

The Speaker

Johnny shook his head. “Nope. Headed west to Kunghit.”

“Why?”

He sat back, beaming, “I am adopting,” he crowed proudly. “We go to Haida country to pick up my new son.”

“Congratulations,” said the girls together.

“How old is he?” Julia asked.

“Five and a half. But his parents say he’s ready. Been giving them no end of trouble,” he laughed, lowering his voice. “Turned the dogs blue the other day and wouldn’t put them back.”

Everyone laughed but Julia, who didn’t get it. “His parents are just giving him away because he’s a handful?”

Hecuba set a hand on her arm. “A magical handful,” she whispered. Hecuba and Memenqwa had been talking extensively over the past few days, trading recipes and spell notes.

“It is our way,” Nea said. “The parents were told and prepared for this the day he was born. They aren’t cut out of his life, but he can’t learn to hone or control his gifts without us. Think of it like boarding school.”

“Fostering,” Hecuba said. “The old way.”

Meme piped up. “Anang came to us that way. I came to the tribe that way. I’ll stay. Anang didn’t.”

Anang nodded her agreement. “I never regretted it. I met Joseph on the way back to my people. It was a better life than I would have had if I had remained with my parents.”

“Speaking of staying,” Meme interrupted. “You *will* be home for the Spring holidays, won’t you?”

Nea narrowed her eyes. “There a particular reason why?”

“We need you...” Tuwe began.

“We *want* you,” Meme cut him off with an elbow, “to sponsor us.”

“Finally going to make it official, huh?” Nea grinned. “So when are you due?”

Meme frowned. “I’m not.”

“Gaganan was sure you would be. Spring was his prediction.”

“Not this Spring,” said Tuwe. “Next Spring.”

Meme just glared at him. “Boy or girl?”

“Lizard wouldn’t say,” he shrugged, nibbling idly on a bread stick.

“He never tells you what I want to know.”

“Gotta keep you guessing, woman,” he grinned

The Speaker

“Not here,” Johnny said, as Meme looked like she was about to let Tuwe have it.

Julia leaned into Hecuba. “What are they talking about?”

Nea grinned. “They need me to be a sponsor at their wedding. Like a maid of honour, but with long term responsibilities. Advice, other kinds of help when needed.”

“Kinda of like a wedding version of a godparent?” Julia suggested.

“Yes. That’s a very good way to put it,” Redbird said.

Meme turned to Redbird’s quiet little wife. “Anang, you will be there too, won’t you? As a sponsor?”

Anang smiled. “Of course, dear. Thank you for asking.”

“Don’t worry,” Redbird said. “I’ll make sure they get to the wedding. All of them.”

Tuwe turned to Nea. “I trust you’ll deal with those two and the requirements for entering the reservation?” he said, pointing at Hecuba and Julia. Nea nodded. “Your aunt isn’t going to like it one bit, but she can just stick her head in a gopher hole as far as I’m concerned.”

They laughed at that.

The small party said their goodbyes as time came for the continued trip west. Redbird gave the girls a ride back up to campus.

When Nea and Julia got back to their room, Nea found something on her bed. It was thin, about 18 x 14 and wrapped in plain brown paper. “What is this?”

Julia grinned, “Open it.”

“You didn’t have to...”

“Just open it.”

Nea unwrapped it. Gaganan, watching over her shoulder, snickered. It was a drawing, a very good one, deeply shaded and clean lines, in a Pre-Raphaelite style. The subject was Sleeping Beauty and her Prince. The prince knelt beside a curtained bed, frozen in the moment as he bent for the fate filled kiss. “It’s breathtaking. You... why give me this?”

Look closer.

The picture was rich in detail. By the foot of the bed where the bedspread spilled onto the floor slept a cat that might have been Gaganan. There was a serpent carved into the bed post. It was when she studied the faces of the people that she gasped. *She* was the sleeping princess and Thomas was the Prince.

She blushed immediately. “Why... would you...”

The Speaker

Julia shrugged. “Oh, just something I saw.”

“Wait, you mean Thomas was in the room? And kissed me while I was sleeping?”

Julia dropped onto her bed, pulling Lulabelle out of her cage. “Well, I didn’t see him kiss you, but... he was sitting by the bed, held your hand... I’m shore the thought crossed his mind,” she chuckled. “Why do you think there were camellias in the room?”

Nea sat down on her own bed, stroking the cat as she stared dumbfounded at the drawing. “The feather?”

“Probably. It was in your hand when we came in, along with the camellias. And we can be shore the staff didn’t put it there.”

She stroked the white shaft now tied in her braid wrap, opposite the owl and raven feather. “How often did he visit?”

“Only the once that I know of. But that was more like a thief in the night. Of course, all the people there, he might have felt uncomfortable with you not awake to explain things.” She stared at Nea for a long moment. “So... what is there to explain?”

Nea was not sure she wanted to tell Julia about the waking up in Thomas’s bed incident, nor about her shifting into animals yet. And she was not exactly certain what there was, beyond that, to explain. “He’s in my Medical Anthropology class. He’s the boy I tripped over that first Chinook on the Green. I like him a terrible lot, but have no idea how much or if he likes me... like this,” she ended, holding up the picture. “It’s beautiful, by the way.”

“You’ve said that. Maybe I’ll show you the animation I’m working on when I’m done.”

“Animation?” Nea balked. “What?”

Julia grinned. “Oh, they won’t look ‘quite’ like you two. I’m only so good with the 3D models. But the idea is there. I’m still working on the textures and the base set up, but once I start doing the frame by frame it’ll pick up fast.”

Nea shook her head, propped the picture up on the night stand. “One should not argue with one’s muse, or so I understand, so I will not argue with your creative spirit. Spider will weave what she will and you have no choice but to follow the threads. Just... make sure it doesn’t look too much like us if you’re going to show it to your class?”

She laughed. “I don’t think that will be much of a problem.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

Serpents and Snapdragons

Nea headed for Medical Anthropology with mixed feelings. She wasn't sure what, if anything, to say to Thomas. If she expressed her feelings and he did not reciprocate them... But how could he not? The flowers, that afternoon on the Green...

Something did not feel right. She could not place it, but something was very wrong. She made her usual detour to grab a drink from the vending machine to go with the lunch she always brought to the Anth. building. As she bent to pick up the dispensed bottle, she saw a reflection in the plastic as someone moved behind her.

She turned, glared up at Jonah standing suave and smug behind her. He had a rose in hand, reached out with it and stroked her cheek with its petals. Even as she recoiled back against the machine, she felt a very visceral sensation come over her, a warmth that began in her belly and spread out from there like a flash fire. There was a scent in the air that made her senses reel.

"Ah," he said. "Roses do bloom best in winter."

Nea blushed, lowered her eyes as she smiled. She was flattered by the comparison, accepted the rose. It took her a few seconds before she dared to look up at him. His smile made her knees weak and she was grateful for the machine behind her. "Afternoon, Jonah," she breathed. "Can I ...help you with something?"

Jonah's smile was genuine. "Actually, yes," he said, leaning his arm on the machine above her head, bringing him so close she had difficulty breathing. "There is this girl I want to take out, but she hasn't the clothes appropriate for where I want to take her. What do you suggest I do?"

The Speaker

Nea was disappointed he only wanted advice. “I am sure she would follow you to the ends of the earth in rags if necessary.”

“Ah, as nice as that kind of devotion might be... there is the matter of appearances in this case. And Cassat’s does not allow in those less than dressed.”

“Cassat’s?”

“Ah yes,” he nodded, brushing a finger along her cheek. “It is a Five Star restaurant in Calgary. Wine, fine food, dancing; an intensely romantic evening full of promise. But I know she hasn’t got the kind of clothes she will need.”

“You could always get them for her. Take her shopping as a prelude to the date,” she suggested. She was clueless. “Turn her into a princess, take her to dinner and dancing and by the end of the evening she’d be yours for sure.”

“You know, that is an excellent idea. There is one shop in this town that sells what I need. Let’s go,” he added, stepping back and holding out his hand to her.

“Me?” she blushed. “Oh, you couldn’t mean me.”

“Oh but I do. Let’s go, my little rosebud.”

Nea let him lead her to the parking lot. Class was out of her mind completely. Nothing else mattered in the world but that she was going out with Jonah Jacobi.



Thomas scanned the classroom for the umpteenth time and didn’t see Nea. Tolby was sitting not far away, smirking in that maddening way of his as he took notes. Thomas was certain whenever his head was turned that Tolby was staring at him. He tried to put it out of his mind, to pay attention to the professor, especially since he kept calling on him for answers today.

He headed to the cafeteria immediately after class, certain that, if nothing else, the other two would be there.

He was distracted at work too, causing all kinds of whispers and giggles from the women in the kitchen about who he was mooning over. The moment he saw the dark head dressed in a red corslet, he went out the door without a word to his boss. “Hecuba?” he called, drying his hands on a towel he had brought with him without thinking.

She looked up. “Oh, hi, Thomas. Have you seen Nea yet?”

He stopped, all the blood running to his feet. “You... you haven’t seen her? She wasn’t in class this afternoon. She’s not... having a relapse is she?”

Julia frowned. “Not that I know of. I saw her crossing the campus on my way to lunch, like she always does. So I know she headed that way.”

The Speaker

“She never made it,” he said flatly.

“If she’s not in her room I’ll call the hospital, see if she’s there again,” said Julia.

“I’ll call you and let you know what’s going on,” said Hecuba.

Thomas thanked them and went back to work, hearing his name being bellowed from the kitchen. He was still uneasy though and his work suffered.

Julia and Hecuba were worried as well, contemplating all kinds of things on the way back to the dorm. Not one of their speculations however came anywhere near to the truth. When Julia swung open the door to her room she stopped dead in the hall. Her keys hit the floor. “Hecuba!” she called.

She popped her head back into the hallway. “What?”

All Julia could do was wave her over and point.

Concerned and intrigued at the same time, Hecuba rushed over. Her reaction was very similar.

Nea was standing in front of the mirror in a drop dead sexy, sterling evening gown trying to see how her hair would look twisted up. There was a pair of stilettos with rhinestone studded straps on the floor next to her. She looked over at them with a vapid look on her face. “I don’t know. What do you think? Should I twist it or curl it?”

“Um, hon? Where did you get that dress?” Julia finally managed.

Nea dropped her hair and turned, showing off the gown. There was a slit that came to mid-thigh, a low back with jewelled straps. The front was cut to lift and accentuate assets that were already fairly decent. “You like it? It is so me!” she giggled.

“It is so not,” Hecuba frowned. “You missed class today.”

“Huh?”

“Thomas said you were not in class this afternoon,” Hecuba said.

Nea waved her hand dismissively. “I’ll go Wednesday. It’s not like it’s important or anything. Today was something special.”

“An’ dinner,” Julia added. “Ya missed dinner.”

She paused sideways before the mirror holding in her belly. “Don’t need it. I’m too plump anyway. Maybe some crunches,” she mused.

Julia and Hecuba looked at each other. Nea was not what anyone would call fat. She had meat on her bones, and a thin layer of what they call baby-fat that softened her body. But she was not even close to plump.

“Or a corset,” Nea said suddenly. “Hecuba, you have a corset, don’t you?”

The Speaker

Then she turned and saw the back of the dress. “Oh, that won’t work... never mind.”

“Nea,” Hecuba began, leaning on the door frame.

“Rosamund,” she corrected. “I like that better.”

The two girls in the doorway exchanged another look. “What is this for?”

“My date,” she beamed. “We were going to go tonight, but he got a phone call. He has to do something important for his mentor the next couple of days. But Friday he’s taking me to Cassat’s in Calgary! Oh!” she spun, giddy. “If I’m lucky it’ll turn into a whole weekend!”

“Who?” they both asked.

Nea stopped spinning. “Huh?”

“Who?” Julia asked, louder. “Who are you going out with? It’s not Thomas,” she whispered to Hecuba. “He couldn’t afford that dress.”

Nea gave a snort. “Thomas couldn’t afford a left sock. I’m not going out with *him*. I’m going out with Jonah Jacobi,” she sighed. She sounded just like a sorority girl swooning over a rock star. “Aren’t you just jealous?”

“Green with envy,” Hecuba deadpanned. Julia just stood there with her mouth open. “N... Rosamund, where’s Gaganan?” she asked calmly.

“Who? Oh, the cat. He got pissy and took off. Yowled something horrible,” she said and went back to her primping.

Hecuba’s mind raced. “So you met Jonah on the way to class?” she asked.

Nea’s mood shifted again. She smiled at Hecuba’s reflection in the mirror as she checked her complexion closely. “Yes. He was so romantic! Asked me out on the spot, then took me shopping for a dress. Can’t go to Cassat’s in jeans, you know. I don’t know, should I get some makeup maybe? I’m just too plain like this. Lighten up my skin tone a little?”

“What did he say to you? Exactly,” Hecuba asked, stepping into the room.

Julia finally was able to snap out of her stupor and headed for the bed. Lulabelle came out from under the pillow and cuddled up to her, as if she were suddenly frightened of Nea.

Hecuba’s eye caught sight of the ferret and she took an involuntary step back.

“Oh, the most romantic things. Something about roses blooming in winter.”

“Uh-huh.” Hecuba tried to focus, studying Nea’s aura as she fretted in the mirror over the shape of her nose and height of her cheekbones. Something was very out of sync. “Well, you’ll want to look your best for him, I’m sure. I think that soap you gave me would smell lovely on you. It lingers nicely.”

Nea glared over her shoulder at her. “Are you out of your mind? I use that

stuff and the dye will come out!” She held up the currently black lock. “I can’t let him see *this*,” she shrieked. “He’d dump me in a heartbeat. I’m a gangly freak enough as it is! No, he can’t know how much of a freak I am.”

“Does he know about you and the animals?” Hecuba asked, suddenly very afraid she might have told him her secrets.

“Hell no! Do you think I’m crazy?”

Hecuba turned and left the room. Julia followed, still holding the ferret. “Where are you going? You’re not leaving me here to deal with Mrs. Hyde are you?”

Hecuba turned to face her and stopped dead as her eyes met the shiny, beady little blue eyes. She suppressed a shudder. “I ...I have to find Gaganan. Where would he go?”

Julia shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s just always here. He’ll be back by nightfall for shore though. But you can’t leave me...”

“Listen,” Hecuba interrupted. “Her behaviour is not normal. A drastic change like that means only one thing.”

“Psychosis?” she suggested.

“Enchantment,” Hecuba corrected.

“Oh! Well, if that’s all there is to it, then we just have her true love kiss her and be done with it. Go call Thomas.”

Hecuba shook her head. “Won’t work. Read *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*. I have to find Gaganan and someone needs to stay here with her to make sure she doesn’t... do anything rash.”

Julia groaned. “Fine. But I don’t know where that cat would go. You find him, I’ll stay here and check the closet for pods,” she grumbled, trudging back into the bedroom.

Hecuba headed to the lobby, she was pretty clueless as to where to go or what to do. She decided her only option was Anang, as Meme was already on her way to British Columbia. She made a right off the stairs and leaned over the counter of the front desk, grabbing the phone book that was always there. She flipped through it until she found Redbird’s name in the directory. She called. Joseph answered. “It’s Hecuba. Is Star available? I need her expertise.”

“Hold on.” She could hear him hollering ‘Honey’, into the other room. After a few moments Anang picked up the receiver.

“Boozhoo,” she said.

“No, it’s Hecuba,” she frowned.

Anang laughed. “Boozhoo means hello. I am sorry. The only people who call

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me are my out of town relatives. What do you need?”

“Oh, ok. Um... I need to talk to you about something. I know we had a long conversation with Meme, and something's happened that... well, I... I haven't any sisters here to back me up on this.”

“What's wrong?” Anang said, suddenly serious.

“It's not something I want to discuss on the phone.”

“Fine. I live on Cherry Hill Lane. Come off campus from the library and turn left at 4th Street. When you get to Cherry Hill, look for the white house with the red weather vane.” With that, they hung up and Hecuba started out.

It didn't take long for her to find the house. It was only a couple blocks east of the campus. Anang met her on the porch and took her immediately into her immaculate and sunny kitchen. She sat her at the table and poured a rose hip tea before she would hear a word.

Hecuba sipped at the tea and explained while Joseph stood in the doorway, leaning on the frame.

“It could be a couple of things,” said Anang after a long moment of silence. “Is she wearing anything new?”

“Besides the seven hundred dollar dress?”

“Jewelry or something that can be left on,” she replied.

Hecuba thought. “No, I don't remember seeing anything but the ring I gave her. In fact, she wasn't wearing her feathers, either. She has a raven, an owl and a swan feather in her wraps. But she had her hair down.”

“It is not likely something he gave her then, as she would not have taken it,” Joseph mused.

“My point,” Anang nodded. “It is something that was done to her, cast over her.”

“That's what I'm thinking. I could see something luminous in her hair when I focused on her auras, that kind of drew off in steamy wisps, but they don't go anywhere. I think I know who did it, but I'm afraid to look.” Hecuba explained what had happened the day she had attempted scrying.

Anang shook her head. “It should not matter. If we can break the connection to the body, whatever part he has, that should be all we need.”

“I know a ritual,” Hecuba began. “But I need a few things I don't have.”

She outlined what would be needed, and Anang made notes, suggested substitutions that had a native bent to strengthen its power against the native victim. “I have foxgloves in the greenhouse. I also have some lilies.”

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“Oh, those are good for breaking love spells,” Hecuba exclaimed. “And thistles, do you have any thistles?”

“Sorry, those I don’t have until summer.”

“I have some dried. They’ll have to do. I appreciate this.”

Joseph stepped into the kitchen, setting his hand on her shoulder. “She is my wife’s kin. It is our duty to do what we can for her. This is important. I am glad she has you for a friend, really. Just do me a favour”

“Sure,” she smiled. “Name it.”

“Don’t let Thomas find out about this. Don’t tell him what Jonah has done. He’ll... try to do something and... I don’t want to see him hurt.”

Hecuba’s smile turned to a wicked grin. “So he is serious?”

Joseph rolled his eyes. “As an avalanche.”

Anang began to pick up the tea things. “Where do you think he got the camellias? Though no one told me Nea was the one he was mooning over,” she scowled at her husband.

Hecuba began helping her put things in the sink. Joseph took over from both of them. “You two go into the greenhouse. You have only one night to do this. Tomorrow is the height of the full moon.”

The next morning, Hecuba came to Julia and Nea’s room before classes. Gaganan came out from under the bed and walked out the door without a glance at Nea. Hecuba leaned her head out the door and whispered for him to wait a second. “Nea,” she said. “I was thinking about what you said yesterday, about your date on Friday.”

“Yes?” she asked, a little wary as she fussed over her appearance in the mirror.

“Well, I noticed how self-conscious you are about whether or not he really likes you, and how you’re afraid he’ll figure out about your... you know... weirdness,” she added in a whisper.

Nea froze, watching her intently.

“I can fix it. Fix it all.”

Nea shot across the room and pulled her inside, slamming the door behind her. Gaganan almost hit his nose on the door as it shut in his face. Nea sat Hecuba on the bed and plopped eagerly next to her. “Tell, tell.”

“Well, I know a ritual. But we *have* to do it tonight, while the moon is full, and you said he’d be busy tonight so you don’t have to worry about him calling and missing him. I can redo your hair, so you don’t have to worry about the spell

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wearing off. And I can bind your powers. I can fix it so you don't come across as weird at all. You'll emerge more beautiful and completely irresistible."

"Like a love spell?" she asked, wide-eyed.

Hecuba recoiled inside. The spell on her went very deep indeed. She had to admire the skill of the work, if not its intent. "Yes, like a love spell. But I'll need something he's given you. Like a rose..."

Nea pulled one out of her nightstand drawer, neatly wrapped and prepped for preservation. "Will this..?"

"Perfect. I tell you what. You go to class like normal. If you see him, don't let him know you are planning anything. In fact, eat lunch up here, so you don't run into him. Meet me at the arts building at 7:45, bring a few towels, a blanket, a change of comfortable clothes and your cloak," Hecuba said, getting up. "It'll take us most of the night, but I think in the morning, when you look in the mirror, you will thank me for it."

Nea got up too. "But what should I wear?"

Hecuba closed her eyes for a moment, biting back the remark trying to get out. If she said what she was thinking, she'd lose this chance to break the spell. Instead, she opened the closet door and rifled through the few things on the hangers. She pulled out a black tiered skirt with red ribbons at the seams, a blue button down denim shirt and a plain yellow t-shirt from the shelf.

Nea frowned. "They hardly match."

Hecuba nodded, "I know, but it's a ritual thing. You need the four colours of life, the ones on your wheel," she said, pointing to the medicine wheel hanging over the desk. "And like as not you'll be sky-clad before we're done anyway."

While Nea was looking at it as if she had no idea why it was there, Hecuba slipped out the door. She scooped up the fuming cat and headed to her room.

Jenny was just grabbing her books to leave after taking Handsome for his morning walk. "You are going to be late," she said. "And why do you have Nea's cat?"

"She said I can borrow him 'cause he's so well trained. I need an animal for a skit we're doing in class this afternoon," she lied smoothly.

Jenny shrugged and headed out. Once the door was closed, she pulled out the spirit board and set it in front of the cat, who just stared at her.

"Look, I know you need to vent, go ahead," she said, pointing to the board.

He gave her a cock-eyed look, sighed and put his paw on the pointer. "Y?"

"Y? Y what? Oh, *why!*" she exclaimed, going to the tank and fetching Princess.

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The snake coiled happily up her arm and snuggled against her warmth, eyeing the cat. “Because I know what happened. I know what’s wrong with her.”

The head tipped. “Things she said,” he spelled.

Hecuba brushed her fingers along his cheek ruff. “I don’t think she meant them, whatever they were. She’s under a spell.”

“She wouldn’t believe me. Told her she was. She put me out. Wouldn’t hear bad things of him. Snake.”

“The viper-constrictor from the dream, so I’ve guessed. I can break the spell, but I have to be careful. The last time I tried to scry on him my circle exploded,” she said, and pulled over the bag with the stuff for the ritual. “I have everything I need here to cast the disenchantment: seawater, foxglove, lily,” she said, as she added the rose to the bag, but in a separate compartment. “What I need is your help. Actually, your friends.”

“Friends?”

She pointed to the spirit board. “Preferably the voice that spoke last time. The big spirit. The mountain. We will need something strong and powerful to guard us against something trying to prevent this.”

Gaganan’s ears went flat. “NO,” he spelled. “Not that one. Is night, can take her. Must not have her, not yet. That one too strong. Must not invoke. Hide her.”

She sighed. “Well we need something strong. She and I will be vulnerable during and immediately afterwards. If this guy can ash a salt circle....”

“Have a few. Do not panic if wildlife show up.”

Hecuba nodded. “So long as they don’t attack. We’ll be at the lake.”

Hecuba had one last thing to do before that night. She let Gaganan out of the room, took a deep breath and picked up the phone. “Yo, state your case,” said the male voice on the other line.

She was taken aback for a moment by the warm baritone and what it said, having been expecting the more tenor voice of Thomas. “I... I was calling for Thomas.”

The voice pulled away from the phone a bit and she heard the squeak of door hinges. “Thomas!” he bellowed. There was a reply from far enough away to not be heard to which the roommate replied in a tempting singsong. “It’s a girl.”

Two seconds later there was the sound of deep warm laughter and Thomas scrabbling for the phone. “Sooneawa?” he gasped.

“No, it’s Hecuba.” She could hear him deflate from here. “I wanted to let you know what’s going on. Nea is all right, but she is not herself today. I’ll explain later.

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It is best you do not see her today, am I clear? I promise you will see her tomorrow, but if you catch sight of her today, no matter what you see *do not approach her.*”

“Why?” There was worry and fear and confusion in his voice all at the same time.

Hecuba sighed, thinking fast. “You ever read fairy tales?”

“Yes. I collect them. They are part of my studies.”

“Well, considering what Nea is, you must expect a certain... weirdness around her. There are taboos for today that will bring great pain and terrible consequences if you break them, not just to you but her as well. And today... just for today... it is that you should not see her. Everything will be explained tomorrow. Can you promise me that?”

He tried to wrap his mind around this. He had always held forth that all fairy tales had some basis in fact. It was appearing that they were more literal, perhaps, than he had once believed. He had not seen her take another shape, but the evidence left little other explanation. He heaved a deep sigh. “All right.”

“Good. Until tomorrow then. Be strong, and don’t worry,” she added with a chuckle, “you won’t be called upon to cut off her head and feet to break a spell.”

They hung up. Thomas was left staring at the phone wondering why she had said that. Was there perhaps some spell involved? His scholar’s mind thought it would be fascinating to see, but his lover’s heart worried why it was necessary. He wandered off to class not even aware of his surroundings.



Gaganan watched Nea fill her backpack with the requested items. He glowered from the windowsill, tail primly and tightly wrapped around his forepaws. She was zipping it up when he finally broke his silence. *Put some tobacco in there,* he said, turning his head so he could see out the window while keeping her in sight.

She scowled, as if offended that he had spoken to her. “Whatever for?”

You will understand later. Right now, just put the damned tobacco in there and go. There will be spirits to pay.

“Oh great, unseen things I only have a cat’s word are there,” she snapped rolling her eyes, but she reached for the tobacco pouch anyway.

You want this to work don’t you?

 he asked, his eyes snapping to her.

“I put it in there, didn’t I?” she growled petulantly, slinging the bag on her shoulder and heading for the door.

The Speaker

When Hecuba came out of the Art's building, Nea was waiting impatiently on the steps. Hecuba smiled, though not for the reasons Nea believed. She led her with idle chatter and cheerful mien off towards the lake.

Once Nea realized where they were headed she groaned. "We're not doing this *in* the lake, are we? It's going to be freezing."

Hecuba laughed. "Only a little, momentary discomfort. You should try waxing. It is our lot to suffer for beauty. But if you want to back out, I'll understand...." she trailed off cunningly.

"Oh no, I'll do it. I... I really need to be normal again. I thank you for doing this. You don't know how much this means to me," she rattled on.

Hecuba's smile tightened. "Oh, I have a fair idea." 'You're the one who has no clue,' she thought to herself.

Before they even reached the secluded campsite Nea could see that someone was already there. Surely Hecuba could see the fire blazing between the trees, but she was still heading resolutely forward. Rounding the edge of the copse, she saw Julia tending to a cauldron sitting on the fire. Julia looked up, smiled and waved. Nea noticed she was wearing a simple white shift, in spite of the chill air, that was belted up to keep it from dragging. Perhaps that was why she stood so close to the fire.

Hecuba set their packs aside, taking a similar white robe out of her own bag and removing all her clothes before getting into it. Nea fidgeted. "Do I get one of those?"

"Not yet. First we have to cleanse you."

Gaganan approached through the woods, climbed up into a tree and found a good place to sit and watch without easy observation. Hecuba had put Nea in a circle of salt while Julia slowly stirred the cauldron. The potion within had been made already, added to the cauldron and kept warm until now. Nea was complaining about hunger. Hecuba quieted her. "We are technically re-birthing you. A newborn wakes to the world hungry, so being hungry is good."

The cat swallowed his revulsion at the changes his friend had undergone. She was under a spell, he had to tell himself. She never would have said the things she had to him otherwise. If she had been herself he would have been within his rights to leave her, binding or not. Her magic would have soured without him. Without his protection *It* would be free to take her, and it would not have been in a good way.

He watched the spirits gathering as Hecuba stood before the now naked girl kneeling in the circle. Hecuba raised her arms to the bright silver moon, called upon the moon tides, and woman magic and the spirits of Nea's ancestors. She called on

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ancient things, but Gaganan could see that what answered her call was no different than what had answered his. A one-horned elk thing drifted idly across the lake towards them, but otherwise, there was nothing different present. Julia handed her a basin from outside the circle and Hecuba held it up too, asked for blessings upon it. Gaganan watched a spirit dragonfly swoop down into the bowl, skimming the surface and fly away, droplets of water from its wings striking Hecuba's hand. It was followed by a spirit frog who hopped in, but did not come back out.

Hecuba poured the contents over Nea's head. She gasped as the liquid struck her body, but did not resist. Julia jumped back as a live frog fell out of the bowl and landed in Nea's lap. Even Hecuba seemed a little surprised. From their reactions, he had to guess that they had not put a frog into the bowl of water and petals. The creature he had seen had been no more than spirit. He grinned, tucking his paws under himself.

Hecuba stood Nea up, shivering slightly in the cool air. The frog hopped aside, out of the way, but did not leave the circle. Julia passed in another bowl, this one of a warm oil that she had drawn from the cauldron. Hecuba began with Nea's head, rubbing the oil into her hair first, leaving no inch of skin uncovered. There was no embarrassment in the way she handled the bronze body under her care. Nea herself seemed almost in a trance at this point, yielded to the oiling, rhythmic hands placidly. All the while she worked, Hecuba was singing. It was a low, singsong melody without real words, just strings of soothing sounds.



Thomas had spent the day tense and confused. He worried he might accidentally catch sight of her, worried why it was necessary, and why he was so ready to believe it was possible or real. That she believed it to be was enough for him, but... did he himself believe? Redbird had cornered him earlier before one of his classes, inviting him to dinner the next night. He had not refused or questioned why they would invite him to dinner on a Wednesday night, knowing he had to work. He had been distracted at work, broken dishes. They had sent him home early, realizing he was useless. In an amazing burst of insight considering the daze he had been in all day, he asked for Wednesday night off. He claimed that his friend who had been in the hospital was out, but that being First Nation, there was going to be a cultural thanksgiving for her recovery and that he had been invited. It was

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important to his studies, he had said. Fearing he would be just as useless the next day, they scheduled him to work the lunch shift instead. He had called in Doris's favour to get the change.

Instead of going home, Thomas took a walk. Without knowing where he was going, he found himself walking the small lake just west of campus. A lone swan sailed over the glassy waters in the moon's reflection, called briefly to a mate somewhere in the reeds. The night was peaceful and clear. So clear he could hear singing from the mountains. He stopped, no, it wasn't from the mountains west. It was nearer. He was aware now, conscious of his surroundings. The swan glided on as if nothing were amiss, but his instincts told him he was not alone.

He moved quietly onward, turning up the collar on his jacket, looking around him for what seemed amiss. He had made an almost complete circuit of the lake, having come in from the eastern side of the woods. To get back to campus he would have to continue through the wooded area, from whence the singing seemed to drift, or turn back and go the way he came. He was closer to the woods.

As he walked around a small promontory point, he was given his first view of the lakeside of the woods. From the angle of the shore and the trees, that copse could only be seen from this one spot. In fact, a few steps left or right and he would never have seen the fire. What rooted him to the spot were the three figures near it. There were two women in white, one with a medium hair colour he couldn't decipher in the firelight, and one with black; and a third of bronze skin and dark hair wearing nothing at all. There was something familiar about the naked woman; something that went straight to the root of his body. She was splashing her face in an almost ritual fashion from a bowl held by the dark haired woman in white.

He wanted to turn and walk away, to go forward and skirt the woods, to move that three feet left or right that would take from him this forbidden sight. Somehow he could not move.

He knew her. The more he watched the more certain he became of who it was. He felt as if he were violating her privacy, but could not even shut his eyes against it. His breath was caught in his chest. She poured the remains of the basin over her head and body, flower petals catching in her hair, clinging to her modest breast. Her nubile body gleamed under the rivulets coursing over her skin. The other two women began to pour something in two lines from where she stood to the water's edge, making a pathway.

Gaganan watched Hecuba set aside her salt box, take a small, handmade broom and open the circle into the path that led to the water. She led Nea to the lake, bade

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her enter the water to wash. Nea did not hesitate, walked out hip deep like a sleep-walker. Hecuba followed, kept a short distance, but near enough to help if it was wanted or needed. He watched the spirits swimming in and out of the area Nea bathed, watched something spreading out from her in the water that was more than the oils with which she had been rubbed. The frog hopped down the new path, waited a few moments until Nea sank below the water before hopping in after her. The water went clear.

Something caught Gaganan's eye. He turned his head to look. A few hundred yards away across an arm of the lake a young man stood. He focused, then calmed when he recognized the darkly curling locks and boyish face of Thomas. He smiled to himself, turned back to watch the spirits around the girls.

Thomas unconsciously held his breath when she went down. He released it when she burst upward from the water, flinging her hair over her back as she did so. The moonlight struck her body, causing her to glow like a copper goddess, and sending a streak of pure silver through the left side of her hair. A peal of thunder exploded in the cloudless sky, making him start. There was a simultaneous flash of light from the shore.

Nea and Hecuba spun, Julia shrieked and threw up her arms to protect herself as the salt lines flared like magnesium set to match. Nea looked down at herself and shivered. It was like having a bizarre dream of eating a giant marshmallow and waking up to find your pillow missing. She was vaguely aware of what she had been doing the last day or so, but it felt so unreal. Gaganan stepped out of the wood-line as Hecuba took her hand and led Nea ashore. He stopped six feet from the fire and sat primly, tail wrapped around his forelegs watching her intently.

Julia was still looking around in fright.

Tell them the spirits are keeping it at bay. This is as far as he will interfere.

Nea blinked, bothered by the chill tone of his voice, but did as he bade her word for word. *Why are you so...* then she remembered. She shivered from more than cold. She crossed to him, naked and still dripping, crouched and offered her hand to him. *Forgive me. We are never more cruel than when we are blind to the truth. He will pay for this.*

He shook his head. *He is too dangerous. Best to just stand strong and show him it is pointless to force things. Do not give him cause for vengeance.* Then he walked closer, putting his paws on her knees and began to lick her face. *I did miss you.*

Thomas faltered, seemed to come out of whatever spell had held him

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motionless. He turned, began walking up the path around the wooded area back to campus.

CHAPTER TWELVE:

The Serpent's Eye

“You *what?*” the Master bellowed. Jonah sat against the one table not yet overturned and examined the hole in the breast pocket of his best black ceremonial robes. He did not flinch as the Master railed, pacing amid the ruins of a blown circle. “You risk three months of preparation, blowing a ritual that cannot be done again for another twenty years for what? *A mere woman?*” he screeched, his Eastern European accent falling crisp in his ire.

Jonah looked up at him. “No, master, I did not. Rosamund is no *mere woman*,” he said with surprising calm. “If she were, I would not have had to resort to the Love Bind.” His bright jewel eyes flashed. “She *resisted* me, master. No *mere woman* resists me. We saw to that.”

The Master stood stock still suddenly in the centre of the disaster. His normally neatly queued silvery hair was loose and wild with static, his usually calm dark eyes were wide and stormy. The edges of his robes were singed and his fingers blackened. Now, in this wild state, more than any other time, Jonah remarked to himself how like Rasputin he looked, barring the light hair and the clean chin of course. When the Master spoke again, his voice held a deadly calm. “A rare beauty?” he said, only the barest hint of a sneer.

Jonah shrugged. “Passing fair,” he frowned, crossing his arms and levelling his gaze at the Master.

The Speaker

The man seemed to relax just a hair. “At least you are not in love with her. What, besides resist you, makes her so desirable then?”

One eyebrow arched in a sarcastic expression. “Need I more?”

The Master chuckled at that. “No, I suppose not. Not you. But surely something more for you to resort to this for ‘passing fair,’” he added with an arched brow of his own.

Jonah dropped his arms, pressing his hands against the wood of the work table, staring at his expensive and now very scuffed shoes. “I cannot explain it. When I first laid eyes on her... I was on fire. I was drawn to her. I couldn’t tear my gaze from her. Love her? No. But damn it, I *must* have her. I will possess her or perish in the attempt. I do not think that is love. In fact, I do not think I would care a wit for her passing once I have had her. But I swear by all that is magical and mundane, have her I will.”

“Hmmm,” the Master mused, began smoothing his long white hair back into some semblance of neatness. “There may be a magical reason for your attraction. Let us see this girl,” he said, grabbing a broom which he handed to Jonah, while he began to right what appeared to be a baptismal font... until one looked more closely. There were no crosses or Celtic scroll-work on the stone font. The markings were older, more crude, Druidic in nature. The Master began to check it for damage; satisfied, he went to the well for water.

Jonah sighed, began to sweep the ashes and debris from the inset pentagram on the floor in a ritual pattern, his jaw set against the menial nature of the task. ‘One day, old man,’ he thought.

Finally, the Master was ready, calling him over to the freshly filled font. “Now, I take it you still have the ashes of that posy of yours?” he said, holding out his hand without looking.

Jonah fished out the remnants of the kerchief with the sweat-stained petal bound in her hair. It was singed where it had held the charm, but there were still some fragments and ashes clinging to its edges. These the Master sprinkled over the water as they gazed within it. It did not take long for Sooneawa to come into focus in the water, sitting on the bank wrapped in a blanket beside a roaring fire. There was one girl with her that could be seen, a red-head of no consequence dressed in a white shift, obviously playing at the witch. Someone else moved about, but would not come into focus. Then something passed over the surface of the water, blocking the view and obscuring the vision completely. Only their own, eager faces reflected back at them now.

The Speaker

The Master was smiling. “Well, I know why you are drawn and obsessed.”

Again the arched brow. “Really. Enlighten me, master,” Jonah said flatly.

“And why you must have her.” His eyes were wild again, this time with excitement. “Oh, and you will, my boy. We both will!” He turned, darted to a shelf where he began searching for a book.

“Excuse me? I don’t remember saying I was willing to share. Maybe when I’m done,” he snapped.

“You should have come to me first, boy!” he snapped, ignoring, for the moment, the defiance. “We could have avoided this whole debacle. Months of preparations and thousands in materials... gone... sigh, no matter, this will make up for it.”

“Why? I did not want you to take her for yourself. And I am still unwilling to allow it.”

The Master turned to find himself face to face with those cold jewelled eyes. There was danger in them. He sneered, “So the little viper thinks to rear his little hooded head? *Askath!*” he snapped.

Jonah stepped back in pain, his hand to his temple. “Ah!” He wiped a trace of blood from his nose as the Master brushed past.

“One day, *Raduka*. But not today,” he said dropping a heavy book on the table, began leafing through the pages carefully. “Now, I know I saw it here...” he mumbled as he searched.

Jonah glared fiercely at his back, wishing he had the athame in hand but knowing it was not yet time. There was more the master knew that he did not. He was still needed. He waited until the cool, stabbing pain subsided in his temple and came over to the table, wiping the blood away. There were many interesting things on the pages he passed. Finally, the Master stopped on one with a triumphal “Ah ha!” and smoothed the page. It read in a daggered script: *The Crucible of Power*.

“This spell was created to take the power from magical creatures and imbue it within the mages casting the spell,” he chuckled.

“Wait, you’re saying that Rosamund is a witch?” “That would explain the attraction,” he thought to himself.

The Master rolled his eyes. “No, I said *magical creature* not magus. This spell was not made to take from wielders, but creatures, like unicorn and fey. From what little I saw of her in the scrying pool she is not a wielder. She cannot manipulate the forces of the universe to her will as we can. She *is* a force of the universe... in her way.”

The Speaker

This was news indeed. “What is she?”

“Who knows. That was not apparent. Some aboriginal thing surely. Only her raw power was obvious.” He saw the light in Jonah’s eyes and squashed it. “Don’t get any ideas, boy. She is not without her gifts, I assure you. Her powers may enable her to swat you down like the gnat you are.”

“Will this ritual kill her?” he asked, straining to read it upside down, but the archaic hand in which it was written made it very difficult.

“Probably. It doesn’t say. It may depend on her constitution; it may depend on whether or not she can live without her magic. Why?” He narrowed his gaze on Jonah. “You aren’t still thinking of her in amorous tones are you, boy?” he growled. “The power you will gain from her this way is immense, even divided between us.”

“I have my reasons. Does the spell require her virgin?” he snapped with sarcasm. “If it was meant for creatures, I highly doubt it. I will want my way with her, out of vengeance and personal rivalry if nothing else. After all, the little bitch broke my spell, apparently prefers a little piece of a nobody to me. I want her humbled, on her knees before me, acknowledging my dominance. I want her spirit before I take her power.”

The Master grinned. “I taught you better than I thought, it seems,” he chuckled. “Well, the spell will take a great deal of preparation. It will give you time. But if you are going to do it, do it right. She will be an excellent venue to teach you the finer arts of intimidation. But no more spells. You need to learn to do this without them.” He moved away from the book to the shelf, collecting yet another tome. “We can house her here for your ‘lessons’. It will take me a while to acquire some of these ingredients and one or two take a month or more to ferment. But before you run off and snatch her away, we must be intelligent about this. Plan it out well. No witnesses, no trail. And... you’ll need something to bind her powers, whatever they are. That I think I can manage,” he said, laying the second book open in front of Jonah. “I’ll just need a measure of silver.”

Jonah examined the image in front of him and smiled. “Oh, I think I can manage that.”

“Good. Now, meantime I want you to study the Crucible spell. I want no risk of anything going awry on this one.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

Camellias

Hecuba and Nea showed up for dinner. Joseph opened the door and let them in.

“Where is the other girl? Julia?” he asked, frowning.

Hecuba rolled her eyes. “Date.”

“William asked her out before your invite came in,” Nea apologized. “She’s been going on about it all day. They’re doing some film festival in the basement of the Fine Arts building. Some film student thing, and invites are impossible to get.”

Hecuba frowned. “I thought Spritely was a soccer player?”

“His sister’s in Film School.”

Joseph grinned. “She’s dating the school’s goalie?” he asked, finally moving out of the way.

Hecuba grinned, “I didn’t know you followed the soccer team.”

He shrugged. “A man’s gotta have a hobby. Anang’s in the kitchen.”

Anang was still cooking. She glanced over her shoulder as the girls came in. “A little early, but no mind.”

“But you said...” Nea began, glancing from her watch to Hecuba.

“I got the time mixed up,” she said without flinching. “Sorry, Anang. Can we help?” Hecuba asked as Anang was pulling a fresh loaf of cornbread out of the oven.

“Wow, that smells good,” Nea breathed. “No flat bread tonight?” she chuckled.

The Speaker

Anang shrugged. "I wanted to try something new," she said, putting it down, pausing to glance out the window. She turned, oven-mitted fists on her aproned hips. "You want to help, fine. Hecuba, you set the table. Plates are over the toaster." She gestured to the cabinet. "Sooneawa, you go cut us some fresh flowers. Clippers are in the drawer by the door."

Not sure why she got the less helpful job, Nea nodded and headed to the back door. She could understand though, it was crowded in the kitchen with three women. She opened the drawer of the little table next to the door and frowned. "The clippers aren't here."

"I must have left them outside on a workbench. Bring them in with you, will you?" she answered without looking over.

Nea shrugged and headed out into the garden. Gaganan followed her, pausing to mark the door-frame with a cheek and investigate everything he passed. First, however, he sniffed the air, glanced over towards the camellia bushes, smiled and kept his own council.

Nea scanned the garden, looking for both the shears and an idea which flowers to cut. She headed across the bedded lawn to the greenhouse to look for the clippers. Between the kitchen door and the greenhouse were all the winter hardy plants, with a neat grouping of six camellia bushes in full bloom. She passed within their little circle, pausing to breathe in their fragrance. That was when she heard the quiet snip of the shears closing on a stem. She rounded one bush to come face to face with Thomas holding a freshly clipped blossom in hand. He lit up in an instant.

So did she, but she was still a little confused. A thousand things crowded her brain to be said. "What are you doing out here?" she asked, the first thing that spilled out.

"Anang sent me to bring in flowers for dinner," he said.

"Me too," she laughed. "Explains why I couldn't find the clippers."

He blushed a bit, handed her the flower. "She didn't tell me you were coming. But I'm glad you did."

She accepted the blossom, drank deep of its fragrance, remembering the ones in her hospital room. "Thank you."

"Are you feeling better?" he asked hopefully, searching her face for his answer, happy to see more colour in her cheek and less darkness under her eyes.

"Much, thank you. Listen, Anang's little matchmaking aside... we need to talk." There, she thought, she'd said it.

The Speaker

He gestured across the garden to a little bench beneath the near leafless arbour where every Spring wisteria hung in full grape-like splendour. They sat and once again words crowded her, made using them next to impossible. He waited patiently, smiled as he took note of the swan feather in her braid wrap. "About yesterday..." she began. "You're going to hear..."

He shook his head, touched her hand. "You don't have to explain."

"Yes, I do," she insisted, though the hand on hers felt almost like a live wire. "You're going to hear things and I don't want you taking them to heart, even though they are probably true."

"I know," he said, insistent. "I... I know you and your friends were casting some spell last night. I don't care. I don't have to know."

She paused, studied his eyes. He was trusting her. "How... how did you know about..."

He flushed, glancing away in embarrassment. "If I screwed things up, I'm sorry. Hecuba told me to stay away yesterday. That it would bring dire consequences if I saw you. But I hadn't intended... If she'd told me you were at the lake last night I would have walked elsewhere."

"You saw..." now it was her turn to blush.

"I didn't intend to. I went for a walk around the lake. I... often go there but... I only saw a little bit. The end really, when things blew up. I hope I didn't do that. And you don't have to tell me what spell you were casting. I don't care."

She gave a soft laugh, reached over to brush a stray lock of dark hair from his eyes. "We weren't *casting* a spell, Thomas. We were *breaking* one."

He frowned. "Breaking one?"

"Someone, I don't know how, cast a very powerful love spell on me. We were breaking it last night. Your presence had nothing to do with what happened."

He felt elation and despair all at once, half-noticed the cat throwing himself down on the ground under the bench. "So... you're going to tell me you're not interested any more. I... I can understand... I think." Passion this powerful had to be spell-wrought, he thought. But... but if what he felt was from a spell, why didn't it shatter too?

Man, he was thick, she thought, laughed. "No, I am not going to tell you that. All I know is that on the way to Anth. I suddenly became very interested in someone else. Obsessed."

His heart and stomach switched places again, this time his heart soaring to heights unimagined and his stomach finding new pits. "What? How... how strong?"

The Speaker

Nea glanced away, looking somewhere to the left of the cat by her feet. “Strong enough I hated the very thought of what I was. I... I rejected my heritage, my power, my gift. I wanted to be nothing he didn’t want me to be. It was like someone else was suddenly in my skin. I went so far as to... kick Gaganan out of the room. The spell I thought we were casting was to strip me of those powers. I was ready to throw them away. Hecuba lied to me to lure me out there to break the spell.”

Thomas had some inkling what that meant now. “Whoa.” Any resistance to belief in spells and magic dissolved. He knew that if you believed something strongly enough you could convince your body. He had heard stories of men who, believing themselves cursed with death, just laid down and died, but this... “How did you know the spell was cast?”

“I didn’t. One minute I was ready to brain him with a tea bottle, the next I was fawning all over him. There were no words exchanged, nothing slipped into my food. There was just this smell and...” she sighed, shaking her head of the image. That smell now evoked thoughts of decay and ripening refuse.

He squeezed her hand, which he had yet to let go of. “Who did it?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want you to try anything. You cannot confront him.”

“I don’t care. I want to know.”

She took his face in her hands, “Thomas, listen to me. Breaking his spell *blew up* the protective circle. He was able to overcome all my protections, throw my personality in complete reverse. I believe he did this as payment for my rejection of him. He is powerful and dangerous and I don’t want you to confront him. Just think what he could do to you. I have protections and I am now aware of his power. I stand a chance. You don’t.”

“Jonah,” he spat.

She shivered. How had he known? “Promise me you won’t try to do anything,” she insisted. “I won’t have him cursing you.”

He relented, if only to erase the tension and fear that suddenly filled her. Fear for his safety. “All right. I will let this go. But I swear, if he tries anything else I will break him.”

“If he tries anything else I want you to go to Hecuba for help. She’s the only one I know who can stop him.”

“If that’s what you want,” he murmured, staring into her eyes, lost in their golden brown warmth. His hand stroked her cheek, her skin like the velvet of a flower petal beneath his fingers. He thought he could feel the threads of her hair

The Speaker

against his face, even though her hair was blowing behind her in the warming breeze. She was so close, smelled like heaven. “What,” he began in a whisper. “What would you do if I were to kiss you right now?” he murmured.

She smiled. “Probably ask you what took you so long,” she replied, lost in the scintillating blue and brown of his eyes.

Gaganan, lying under the bench below the kissing pair, smiled at the hummingbird spirit thrumming and beeping around his head happily. He lifted his nose to the shifting wind as a Chinook roared down from the mountains turning winter into near summer. *Good signs,* he thought.



Dinner was served outside. Joseph had moved the picnic table to the lea side of the house out of the direct wind, but it was still warm enough to enjoy the day. No one had said anything about the Camellia in Nea’s hair, or the glances between her and Thomas, but there were knowing smiles exchanged. Talk eventually got around to the night before. “So,” Anang finally said over pie. “I see things went well last night.”

Thomas looked from one woman to another. “You knew?” he asked.

Anang smiled, glanced at Nea. “How much did you tell him, Sooneawa?”

“Everything,” she answered, sliding a small plate with a quarter scoop of ice cream in front of Gaganan who was sitting at the table like a gentleman.

That’s it? he frowned.

That’s all you need. You know what that does to your stomach.

He scowled, but began licking at it.

Anang nodded, turned back to Thomas. “I am Mainganoden. Adopted. My people are the Lynx clan, which you knew.”

“So... that means you have magic too, right?” he asked, slipping his arm around Nea’s waist. She nodded. “So, what is your gift?”

She laughed. “You’ve seen my garden. Let me tell you, Daki’inde did not want me to leave.”

“You worked with my aunt?” Nea frowned. “I am so sorry.”

Anang shrugged. “It wasn’t so bad. She liked what I can do. I served her purposes. But, I hear whispers you are coming into your own power, Silver. So tell me, what gift does a Speaker get?”

The Speaker

Nea flushed being put under the spotlight. “I can’t exactly do it at will yet.”

Gaganan glanced over at her, a flicker of raised brow. *Go ahead. You haven’t tried since the hospital. And you are safe here.*

She sighed. “Well, all right.” She pushed away her empty plate and concentrated. She thought back to what it had felt like to be a cat curled up in Thomas’s jacket, remembered the feel of things beneath paws instead of fingers, remembered how to move a tail, flick a whisker. A low, inarticulate exclamation from Thomas told her she had managed it.

“Whoa,” he said. His words were echoed beside her by Hecuba who was grinning from ear to ear, though Nea noticed her sliding something white under the edge of her skirt.

Joseph, though impressed himself, laughed at Thomas. “Gotta believe now, don’t you, boy?”

Gaganan was very vocal in his joy. *Take THAT, Raven, you old scavenger! HA! Now you *have* to let her sleep!*

Everyone glanced at him and he settled down, slightly embarrassed. Somewhere amid the trees everyone heard the laughter of a crow.

Nea looked up at Thomas, half afraid he’d reject her now that he’d seen the actual transformation. He was in awe. He touched her head, brushed the fur of her cheeks. She closed her eyes, breathing deep. His scent was intoxicating to her feline nose, stronger than catnip.

“You mentioned you were an owl when you fell,” he said suddenly. “Can you do other animals?”

She thought about it, remembered what it was like to be a fox. It definitely felt different than being a cat.

“That is so cool,” Hecuba exclaimed, her jealousy obvious and good natured.

Try the owl again, Gaganan suggested, peering eagerly at her.

She tried. Something wasn’t quite right. She felt an itchiness when she tried to manifest the pinions and suddenly found herself human again, leaning against Thomas with the taste of feathers in her mouth. “Ok, that didn’t work.” She also noticed that while her leather skirt and wool sweater were still on, her underwear was conspicuously absent.

“What were you attempting?” Anang asked as Nea sat up, reaching for her drink to purge the taste.

“Owl.”

The Speaker

Gaganan sighed. *Going to have to work on that one. Still need the active dreaming for that. But it limits what we have to practice at night.*

She nodded. She snuggled up against Thomas's side again, purring. "So it doesn't freak you out?" she asked, hoping he wouldn't notice the missing straps under her sweater.

He laughed. "I won't go that far. But it doesn't bother me. It does present a small problem though."

"Oh?" she asked, worried.

"Yeah. Now I'm going to start wondering if every animal I see is you. That or that you'll throw me over one day for some Tabby."

She elbowed him as everyone laughed.

Hecuba leaned over to Anang. "Kinda reminds me of Tuwe and Meme," she whispered.

Nea changed the subject. "So why didn't you come to the hospital more than the once?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "Well, you were constantly under guard. I felt like an intruder with your family there, and ... truth be known, I was a little intimidated by that woman."

"Meme?" she grinned.

"I guess. I wasn't introduced," he fidgeted.

"Yeah," she confessed. "I can see it. Meme can be very intimidating."

Hecuba laughed. "I guess that all depends on what you're up to."

Joseph stood up, began grabbing plates. "It's been fun, guys, but I have an early class tomorrow. Thomas, I trust you to escort the ladies home?"

Thomas stood, saluted smartly.

Joseph chuckled, shaking his head as he turned back towards the house. "Smart ass."

"Better than being a dumb-ass, sir!" he snapped in military style.

Hecuba laughed as she reached for other plates to help, after secretly slipping Nea her underwear while Thomas wasn't looking. Anang popped the reaching hands. "Shoo. All three of you. We'll get this. Besides, the wind's not going to last all night. Get your coats and hurry home."

Laughing and only a little reluctant, the three of them took their leave, Gaganan trailing along beside.



The Speaker

Hecuba went in first, leaving Thomas and Nea on the front step of the door for more personal farewells. Even Gaganan sat off to the side washing his paws, pretending to ignore them. Thomas stood on the step below her, arms wrapped around her waist, looking up at her in wonder and love. The moon shone down in the gloaming, and he could have sworn it shone oddly off one lock of hair and not others. He twitched his nose as the wind blew the feathers in his face. He smiled. "I like it best down, I think. But then you can't wear these. And I rather like the idea of my feathers in your hair."

"I thought that white one was you," she grinned. "Swan?"

He nodded, kissing her lightly.

"Must have had it a while. It's not their season."

"Nope. Found it on the way to the hospital."

"Really," she murmured. "You know what swan brings, right?"

"Um, let me think. Grace?"

She nodded. "And acceptance. The dream-time, but to a lesser extent than lizard. Oh, you'd better go."

"Ah, kitten. I could stay right here forever."

"But the wind is shifting."

"So? You'll keep me warm," he said, taking the next step that brought him up to her level. He took her face in his hands and kissed her. He felt her melt, wasn't so sure of his own steadiness. He wondered if this was how it felt when she flew. "I keep thinking I'm going to wake up and find this all a fairytale I've been reading," he breathed against her neck.

She just held on to him as if afraid to let go.

You two are not alone out here, Gaganan warned.

Reluctantly she pulled away. "Go on. Be careful."

He laughed. "It's just a short walk."

"And it is not an empty one," she warned. Her eyes were serious, no longer playful. "Watch your back."

He nodded, suddenly understanding. He started down the steps then stopped, began fishing through his jacket pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "Here. I know it's going to be familiar, but I promise you, he stole it. From me. He changed some things, but this is the original, as I meant you to read it." He pressed it into her hands, stole another kiss and then leaped from the step and sprinted for Cather Hall.

The Speaker

With a sigh, Nea went inside, slightly confused, the folded letter to her nose.

“That good, huh?”

She looked up, startled, to see Hecuba leaning against the wall just inside the door.

Hecuba laughed. “Ah, young love. Listen,” she said, began walking with her to the stairs. “Can you spare me a moment?”

“Sure,” Nea shrugged.

On the stairs they passed a boy walking a beagle who stopped to stare at the cat passing him on the stairs. The dog gulped. *Uh.... Don't chase the cats... right... not that one anyway.*

Nea smiled. Gaganan only spared the animal a glance of disdain and trotted ahead of them to the door to the third floor, waiting patiently. They went to Hecuba's room first, but Jenny was there doing homework, so she merely hung up her coat and walked Nea to hers. Julia was still out on her date. Nea dropped down onto her bed. “So, what do you want to talk about?”

Hecuba eyed the cage at the foot of Julia's bed warily, pulled out the chair of Nea's desk and sat down, took a moment to calm her nerves. “Ok. When you shifted, you took some things with you and not others. Why? Is this something you can control?”

“Well,” she began, remembering back. Gaganan hopped up on the bed and she buried her fingers in his fur. “I remember when I woke up in Thomas's bed that I was wearing my shirt and my boots and nothing else. I had fallen asleep in my clothes. My pants and underthings were left under the blanket like I was still wearing them.”

*You *did* have to crawl out of them,* he purred, rolling on his back, tucking his head under and looking over at Hecuba.

“He said I had to crawl out of them, and they were slightly disturbed, but my underwear was still inside my jeans.”

“Ok. Let's take a look at things. Where's the shirt you were wearing that night? I'm developing a theory.”

Nea shrugged and got up, pulling the plaid flannel out of the hamper in the closet. She handed it to Hecuba, leaning her hip against the desk. “Think it might be a fibre thing?”

Hecuba looked at the tag. “No. I think it might be an animal thing.”

“What do you mean? Like there was metal on my jeans, so I couldn't take it with me?”

The Speaker

“Like your shirt was wool and your underwear cotton. Turn around.” Nea obeyed, and Hecuba stood and flipped up the back of her collar. “Yup. Sweater’s wool.” She paused to finger the beads on the braid wraps. “Any of this plastic or wood?”

“No. They’re bone. Wait... so if it was made from an animal it goes with me, and if it’s not it doesn’t?” she frowned.

“Makes sense.” Hecuba sat down again.

Nea perched on the edge of the desk. “Wow. That’s... inconvenient. Cotton’s natural fibre though....”

“Ah, but it’s not *animal*. I think, in part, that it becomes one with your new fur or skin. And in the longer run is actually convenient. You could take nothing with you and be leaving your clothes lying around and having to sneak around naked if you have to shift for safety.”

“Yeah, but... being forced to go commando isn’t my idea of convenient. Or comfortable,” Nea groaned. “How am I going to find woollen lingerie? And I am going to hate it come summer.”

“Well, there’s leather, which may be more comfortable, but come summer you’ll have the same problem. But there may be another alternative. One we’ll have to explore.”

“What?”

“Silk.”

“You’re kidding?”

Hecuba shook her head. “No. It’s produced by a living creature. Now I don’t know if it coming from an insect is going to make a difference, but it can’t hurt to try. I have a silk ribbon in my room. Next time you practice, let me know. I’ll make sure you have it before hand.”

“Thanks. It won’t be cheap buying silk underwear but...” she sighed. “I guess it would be worth it to be able to shift at a moment’s notice. Never know when one will need to fly out of reach.”

Hecuba smiled, “Or scurry into the nearest hole.”

Nea laughed. “Yeah, or that. Going to try something larger eventually. Be damned useful to be able to be a horse once in a while.”

“It would at that. Have you tried snakes yet? Or a lizard?” she asked, putting her elbow on the desk and resting her cheek on her fist.

Nea shook her head. “Probably won’t happen. I change by remembering what it was like. I’ve been told I was never a reptile.”

The Speaker

“Ok,” Hecuba said suddenly, sitting up. “If you think she won’t mind, bring that thing here.”

Nea frowned. “Bring what thing?”

Hecuba swallowed her courage, pointed aimlessly towards the foot of Julia’s bed. “That thing. Let’s... let’s get this over with.”

Nea got off the bed and crossed to the cage. “You sure about this?”

“If I don’t, I’ll never get over it. I got a similar problem with rats. Mice to a lesser extent but... the weasels...” she shuddered. “Just... hurry up.”

Nea opened the cage and reached in. Lulabelle stood up on her hind paws, curious. *I get out? But... snake lady’s here. Not allowed.... You always said hide.*

Shhh, she told her. *No sudden moves. Stay still. Let her approach you. And above all, keep your mouth shut.*

Okies.

Nea brought the unusually still ferret over to the desk, set her in the middle of it. She was fully aware that Hecuba was shivering, but trying very hard to control herself. Gaganan had gotten off the bed and perched himself in Hecuba’s lap, to give her something safe to concentrate on.

“Move your feet, Gaganan,” she groaned as his paws put weight in uncomfortable places. Once he lay down, it was better. Hecuba now faced the ferret. “She’s not going to make any sudden moves?”

“I told her to lay still. Take your time,” Nea coaxed.

Hecuba did. Very slowly she reached out, with several fits and starts, and finally touched Lulabelle’s side. “It... it feels like mink,” she frowned.

“Sort of,” Nea nodded. “A little coarser though.”

She ran her finger down the side, across the back closer to the head. She closed her eyes, not at all certain she liked the texture. However, with her eyes closed, she thought it was a little like a furry snake in shape. It helped to think of it in those terms.

Nea watched both of them carefully.

She’s had enough, Gaganan said, more keenly aware of Hecuba’s body and tension. He butted his head against her and purred.

Nea nodded, picking up the ferret. “That I think is enough for one try,” she said.

Hecuba opened her eyes, did not have the courage to force it.

“It will take time. Don’t rush it. Just... don’t touch your face with that hand until you wash it,” she smiled. “You never know. Having been out of circulation for

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a few days, I don't know when she had her bath last."

"Ah, right," she said quickly, tucking the hand in her pocket. Her other she buried in Gaganan's thick fur. "Thanks, Gaganan," she whispered. "It helped."

"Ahem," came a voice from the door.

They looked up to see Julia standing there, grinning.

Hecuba stood, shifting Gaganan to the desktop, embarrassed. "I am sorry, I was...."

"Getting a little fuzz therapy?" Julia offered. "It's all right, hon. Really. Whenever you need her."

"How... how was your date?" Hecuba asked, getting herself under control as Nea set the ferret on the floor and she hopped over to her mistress happily.

Homehomehome mommy! OOOooo, you smell funny. Whodat?

Nea chuckled.

"Really nice. The movies were cool too. I like his sister. She's a real hoot. I think you'd like her, Hecuba. She has this really black sense of humour," Julia smiled, dropping onto her bed.

"I know Jessica Spritely," she said, standing. "She's in my acting class. Studying to be a director but wants to be able to see things from an actor's point of view. She's got the technical parts down, understands us nicely, but can't really act to save her own life. She's going to get her main grade this semester by directing our play. Which should be ready before Spring Break, so I expect you guys there."

Julia beamed. "Cool, what's it this time? You made a dynamite Desdemona."

"Thank you. And it's A Day In The Death Of Joe Egg. It's really cool. Well, goodnight all." With that, Hecuba made a quick exit.

Nea sat down on her own bed, picked up the letter. She sniffed it, drank deep of the worn leather and intense fragrance of Thomas. It was muted to a human nose, but potent still. She gave a happy little sigh. Gaganan came over, began to make himself comfortable on the pillow. Nea opened the letter and read it. It was in a neat, flowing hand, full of passion and intensity. The paper was softer than new, telling her he had carried it in his pocket for some time. It was the same letter Jonah had given her. There was not much changed, word-wise, but its feeling and purity was preserved. Thomas had addressed it to Sooneawa, not Rosamund. It had been meant as his introduction to her. Unlike Jonah, he had signed it. Now everything made sense, her reaction and every word written. No wonder it had felt so wrong when it had been presented as Jonah's own.

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She was suddenly drawn out of her reverie by a giggle. She looked up, saw Julia watching her, her arms wrapped around her knees, a huge grin splitting her face. “What?” she asked her.

“Love letter?” Julia giggled.

“... Yes.”

“Well?” she asked impatiently.

“Well nothing. It’s the same one Jonah gave me.”

“What?” she exclaimed, letting go of her knees.

Now it was Nea’s turn to laugh. “Jonah stole it from him, used it for his own. I’ve just gotten the real thing.”

“Oh. Nice. You *did* say that it was very... inspirin’.”

Gaganan sneezed for attention. Nea looked over. “Yes?”

Hummingbird’s had her due. Now Raven wants to know when you’ll be willing to start your lessons again.

“Well, why don’t we try the weekends? Friday and Saturday night. That way it won’t interfere with school.”

I think he’ll go for that. Especially, he added in a tone that told her he was talking to Raven at the same time, making his point, *since you won’t be forgetting the lessons when you wake. Will make it easier. Don’t want you having another bout of exhaustion, do we?*

The smug look on his face told her that Raven had acquiesced.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

Flights and Fancy

The Saturday post brought Nea a letter from home. She was arm in arm with Thomas when she went, both of them checking their boxes. Thomas had a package from his mother for which he had to go to the window and ask. Nea wandered over to join him with her letter as he waited, staring at the envelope in her hand. “Whatcha got, kitten?” he asked.

“A letter from home, but I don’t recognize the handwriting,” she mused.

“Are you sure it’s from home?” he asked, suddenly worried.

“The postmark is right. And I don’t know everyone’s handwriting, you know. But... they didn’t put who it was from, and the contents feel weird.”

“Merci,” he said to the girl who handed him his package.

“De rien,” she beamed at him. “Bonjour!”

He waved and led Nea out into the cold sunshine. “Well, are you going to open it?”

“Why don’t we go out to the Green?” she said, giving a little chirrup to Gaganan who wound himself around her legs the moment they stepped outside.

“Sure.”

The three of them headed to the quad and the wide swath of grass and trees in between the dorms. They sat down on a picnic table as the grass was still a little too snow-damp to sit on. She opened her letter and Thomas unwrapped his box. Gaganan went off to stalk squirrels in the trees while around them a few dog

The Speaker

owners took their pets for walks and a little play time in spite of the cold.

The letter inside the envelope was written, oddly enough, on willow-bark. The Ojibwa symbols scratched most likely with what Falling Elk laughingly called a ‘char-pen’, little more than a sharpened stick charred in a fire. The letter was from Spider Yellowbuck. Nea gasped.

Thomas looked up from his box. “What is it?” he asked, worried.

She gave a laugh. “Nothing dangerous. Just shocked. I’ve... never gotten a letter from Elder Spider is all. Wow. This is...”

“A rarity I take it?” he asked when she could not find the words.

She nodded, glanced over into his box at the second package buried in packing peanuts. It was wrapped in birthday paper perhaps more suited to a teenage boy than a grown man. She smiled. “And you have?” she prompted.

He blushed. “My mom,” he said, pulling it out, being careful that every peanut remained in the box, which was not easy. “She... she has Alzheimer’s. She sometimes forgets things... like my birthday is in March, and that I’m not fourteen anymore. When I’m actually *there* it’s easier for her to remember how old I am, though there are times she thinks I’m my father. I can’t wear this coat,” he said, plucking at his bomber jacket, “when I go home or I’ll get a soldier’s homecoming.” He blushed even harder. “It’s one thing for your mother to kiss you on the cheek...”

She leaned against him. “That’s sweet. So your father’s passed?”

He nodded. “A while ago. He was like seventy-five. He was about twenty years older than mom when they got married. He was a vet of WWII, and even though it wasn’t mom who was waiting for him to come home from the war... sometimes she thinks she is. She has all his old pictures, from his first marriage to my sister’s dad.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister.”

He grinned, planting a kiss on her forehead. “And it wasn’t until the other day I found out you are an orphan with an entire tribe for a family. There is a lot we don’t know about each other. But we’ll figure it out. By the way, how’d the flying lessons go last night?” he asked, bent to open the package.

She rolled her eyes. “Awkward. I’m still having control issues. I can get up, glide with the best of them, but finer controls elude me... that and the slightest shift in the breeze... On top of that, I still can’t do birds awake.” She had explained to him how Gaganan put her into a state of waking dreaming. She had laughed at him when he had expressed an interest in trying it himself. “So what did she send you for an un-birthday present?”

The Speaker

He groaned. “See,” he said, holding up a hand tooled leather horse statue in full stride. “She still thinks I’m fourteen. I used to collect horses,” he murmured, running his hands lovingly over the animal’s surface. “At least it wasn’t a plane model. She went through about a year of that. I kept giving them to the Boy’s Club. I finally started decorating my room at her house with things I *do* collect... well, things I wouldn’t mind getting. So she will go in and see it and get ideas.” He gave a laugh. “There are times when she sends me my own things. For Christmas this year she gave me one of the Fairy Tale collections out of my own library! But it’s the thought.”

He sighed, and she hugged him, content to cling to his warm body, half tempted to shift and curl up in his jacket.

“So, what did this elder have to say?”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, picking it up to read it. Gaganan hopped up on the table.

Who’s it from?

Spider.

He suddenly crowded next to her, trying to read it over her shoulder.

Thomas shook his head. “That still gets me.”

Jealous?

 Gaganan grinned, glancing up at him and half closing his eyes. He knew that Thomas couldn’t read Ojibwa yet.

Behave.

I don’t know how, he simpered, putting his head back over the letter until she had to physically move him so she could see.

Sooneawa Ginimaj Majiwe,

I told you once you are not a Memory. But your gifts rely upon your memory, not an ancestral one, on your own personal journey. Talkers are uncommon, speaking the ways of one thing, maybe two at best. There is maybe one born to a tribe in any given generation. They understand one thing: wolves, bears, birds, the winds, the sea. Speakers are more rare. Maybe one born in a hundred seasons to all of The People, whatever we name ourselves, whatever the tribe or clan. I know of three that still live: a Hopi man who speaks to the scaled brethren, a Seminole woman who understands the songs of the insect world, and you.

But you are more than a Speaker, child. You are a Shaper, and that is rarer still. All Shapers are Speakers, but not all Speakers are

The Speaker

Shapers. The last one I knew of died a hundred years after the white man invaded. You are special. A treasure. And there is more I cannot tell you here. There are things even He will not allow to be put to paper. As it concerns Him. I will send Zoongizi to you at the turning of the moon. He will explain. As I am within His reach, He will not allow me to speak these ancient truths.

Do not squander your gifts, child. What you learn there is invaluable, to us and to you. Come home whole. ...and bring the boy. I will meet this man the spirits cannot touch.

Spider Yellowbuck

Nea was quiet for a long moment after reading. She looked at Gaganan. *Did you tell her about him?*

Not unless Raven did. Or Hummingbird. I didn't. How could I? he blinked.

But... can the spirits really not touch him?

He nodded. *When you were in the hospital and I was unable to get in, you were plagued by serpent spirits, and other malign things. They scattered when he came in. He carries it like a shield before him. I cannot explain it. Maybe Spider can. Bring him to the wedding.*

She looked up at Thomas, who was watching her for some indication of what she had read. "Would you like to go to a wedding with me?"



That night Nea talked Gaganan into letting her try bats. Being mammals and not birds, the transformation was much easier, but required the whole night just to get used to echolocation. Her theory was that it would be easier learning to fly as a bat, giving her better groundwork for learning feathered flight.

Sunday, when she got up, wide awake and aware, she tried again to become a bat. It came as easy as any other mammal, though she blinked in the bright light. Julia walked in after church, jumped to see a bat on Nea's bed. She got herself under control as Nea shifted back, giggling. "Sorry."

"Gave me a heart attack!" Julia fussed. "God, I swear if you hadn't tole me you could change into animals that night by the lake I might'a hit you with a broom!"

"Nah, you just really would have had a heart attack."

Gaganan just grinned from the windowsill.

The Speaker

“So how did it go last night?” Julia asked as she began changing.

“Fair enough,” Nea admitted, wrapping her fur blanket around her shoulders.

“No flying, but I’ve got that whole echo thing down. It’s really fascinating.”

“And the silk?”

Nea held up her braid, still bound in a silk ribbon.

“Cool! Hecuba’s gonna be pleased.”

Nea frowned. “Only one problem though. Two actually.”

Julia paused pulling a turtle-neck over her head. “What?”

“Elastic and plastic.”

She pulled the shirt on fully. “Huh?”

“Waistbands and clasps. They have to have a way to fasten them on. You’ve got elastic in the bands and metal or plastic in the clasps. I’ll never find a bra or panties that are 100% natural. Not the way I need it. And tying everything on...” she sighed. “That’s going to show under summer clothes. I might as well give up, or go commando.”

“There’s nothing...”

“The clasps would have to be made out of bone or antler. And the bottoms... if they have no elastic or lycra they have no give, no way of getting them over the hips. Which in my case are fairly ample,” Nea groaned.

“You ain’t fat. You have a nice body,” Julia frowned. “Thomas seems to like it anyway. And that Jacobi character looked fairly hot for it.”

Nea laughed. “I’m not unhappy with my shape, Julia. I meant that if the material has no give or no way of fastening it on, I’m not getting it over them to rest at my waist... which is narrower than my hips. Ah well, nothing for it,” she said, getting out of the blanket and pulling on her discarded underthings of the night before.



Dinner that night brought an excited report from Hecuba who had refused to tell Julia until they were with Nea. They moment their trays hit the table Julia pounced. “Aw right, spill it!” she snapped.

Hecuba smiled, leaned forward to keep others from overhearing easily. “You remember you dropped that box of stuff Jonah gave you at the desk in Founder’s Hall?”

Nea frowned. “Yeah,” she said warily.

The Speaker

“Well, it seems our friends Riti and Roma were on their way out when he came in and got it!”

“Naw!” Julia breathed, her eyes wide.

Nea froze, her fork suspended between her plate and her mouth. “And?”

Hecuba grinned. “Oh, he was livid all right. Fit to be strait-jacketed. But he barely showed it. His jaw went tight. Now, here’s the thing,” she said, no longer grinning. “He had opened the box and not batted an eye. I questioned them thoroughly. It was almost like it was no surprise at all. It was when he read a letter inside that he went apoplectic.”

Nea nodded, setting her fork down, folding her arms very cat-like on the edge of the table between herself and her plate. “What else?”

“Well, when he noticed them, he straightened up. They were fawning on him as usual. Like most women on campus they can’t seem to resist him. Of course, with them, his money and his course of study is a higher attractant, I’m sure. Their mother is constantly on them to marry well. They think if they can find someone who meets her standards that *they* like, they can escape having her pick someone for them. Anyway, they were all over him in sympathy. Seems he was thrown over by some girl, they didn’t know who. He didn’t go upstairs. He took the box with him and went back out.”

Nea sighed, staring at the plate.

“Something wrong with the meatloaf?” came a voice right behind her.

Nea smiled, leaned back only to meet with a hand blocking her head from hitting him. She frowned and turned. Thomas gave her an apologetic smile spread hands to indicate the state of his apron. He sat on the bench. “It’s ok, kitten. I wouldn’t eat my cooking either,” he grinned.

“I thought you didn’t do the cooking?” Nea asked him.

“Not normally. But we were short handed today, they had me help. I’m not used to cooking in tons. So, if it’s not the food, why the bad vibes?” he asked, wiping his hands on a towel and pausing to place a kiss on her cheek.

“We were talking about *Roses*,” Hecuba said with an expression that said she was not talking about flowers.

Thomas stiffened. “Oh? I guess that’d put anyone off their feed.”

Julia stifled a laugh.

“Yes,” Hecuba continued, “Nea,” she said looking at her, “was about to tell me what she put in that letter which caused him to actually show his temper,” she said pointedly.

Thomas looked at her in askance, suddenly worried. “What letter?”

The Speaker

She sighed. “In that brief time we were... dating,” she grimaced at the word, “he bought me a very expensive dress and shoes: trophy clothes. I had to return them. I wanted nothing to do with them. So... I boxed them up and left them at the desk at his dorm. ...With a letter inside.”

“Which said?” Hecuba prompted.

“Basically I told him, in case he was not already aware, I no longer had a need for them. I also told him that I was fully aware of what he tried to do and that the things had been both dry-cleaned and smudged so there was no point in scouring them for trace hairs or other personal connections to my person.” She hesitated.

“And?” Thomas prompted, reading something in the hesitation.

“And that if he ever tried anything like that again... I would make sure he lived to regret it. ‘First Nation curses are not to be trifled with.’ In those exact words,” she breathed.

“Whoa. And you were warning *me* to be careful?” Thomas growled.

“I had to. Thomas,” she lowered her voice, “if he knows what he is doing, then he may believe in curses, and if so, threat of one may provide the deterrent that ‘no’ did not. I can’t have him continuing to try again.”

“Only one flaw in your theory,” Hecuba said. They looked at her. “You wrote him a letter. Words from your hand carry power too, can be used in sympathetic magic just as easily.”

Julia smiled. “Nope. Used my printer. Never touched the damned thing!” she crowed.

Hecuba stared at her a moment, then laughed. “Ok, you may very well have checked him. Whether or not it is a *checkmate* remains to be seen.”

Thomas leaned in and stole another kiss. “I have to go back to work, kitten. I’ll catch up with you later. Meet me after your morning class, we’ll grab lunch before Anth.”

She nodded and watched him go. She turned back and forced herself to eat.



The night of the New Moon, Nea went out to the lake to meet Zoongizi. Gaganan had relayed a message from various spirits that the great raven would be waiting there for her. She told Thomas where she was going and for him to meet her there after work. She did not have to wait long. She had just gotten a small fire

The Speaker

going when the bird landed a few feet away from her. She nodded her head to him, treating him as she would any tribal elder. She offered him a bit of fish she had brought with her from supper and sat back to wait on him. He gobbled it up, glancing from her to the cat to the glen at large.

The boy is not here, the one the spirits say is not real, he said. His voice was deep and reverberated within her. There was no question in her mind that he was a nījii manidoo. She understood him more clearly than other birds.

He is working, Zoongizi, she told him. *Doing man-things. He will be here before the North Star touches the water.*

Good. This is not for him to hear, or to know... yet. He turned to Gaganan, clacking to him in a manner she could not understand, but apparently the cat did. Gaganan got up and performed a strange dance with the raven around the fire and where Nea sat. When they were done, the raven came closer, standing taller than Nea sitting. Gaganan curled up half in her lap, keeping his eyes on the area behind and beside the great bird.

Now. Your story I tell. You know what the mountain guards. That I do not have to tell. But you are deeply connected. Cold Heart sought secrets, followed a vision quest to the Heart. But as she beheld Him she grew afraid and fled, unwilling to pay the price. So she paid a different one. Your mother. Your father.

Nea frowned. *But... you lose that which you love. Ninoshenh hated him.*

The raven regarded her interruption with a cocked eye. *Not in the beginning. But that is not your story. Not right now. Your story begins with the silver mark He gave you when He took your mother. His mark. That is why they hid it. He marked you so He might find you anywhere, when the moonlight touches it He can see you.*

Her hand flew to the hidden streak. *I... wasn't born with it?*

He solemnly shook his head.

He was quiet long enough Nea felt comfortable asking another question. *What will He do with me?*

What He did to the last Shaper. The bird watched her, contemplating something beyond her at the same time. *We don't know. That fate is beyond the Memory. We know she lived with the tribe a very long time, many great-grandchildren she left when she climbed the mountain and was never found. But her end... He has hidden from us. You are a descendant of Bedowe, the Shaper who belonged to the Mountain. Perhaps this is why you have been chosen, why you survived. It is interesting that you do not speak Serpent, yet He chose you over one who did. But

The Speaker

His ways are unfathomable.

You cannot hide from Him forever, and His wrath will be great if He wakes and you are not near. When you have done this thing, he said, jerking his head towards the distant school, *you must come home.*

I had planned on it, she answered quietly, her fingers massaging Gaganan's side as she absorbed the information. His purring calmed her.

He knows she is here, Gaganan said, blinking lazily up at Zoongizi.

The bird's attention was acute. *Explain,* he snapped.

Gaganan told him of the spirit board he had been using to communicate with another Wonder Worker, and the message he had received from the Spirit of the Mountain. The raven remained silent.

Then, *Good and not good. He knows and nothing bad has happened. Mayhap He is waiting to see what you will do. When you come home to us, do nothing to attract His notice. When you leave again, do not return until you are ready to stay. That is Our advice. I would tell you more, but we are no longer alone.*

Nea turned, saw Thomas standing at the edge of the clearing nervously. He felt like an intruder, but she had asked him to come. He did not move until she waved him over. As he crossed to the fire, his eyes grew wide as he took in the size of the raven. The bird was larger than an eagle. He bowed to the creature and sat down next to Nea, automatically brushing the back of his hand along Gaganan's cheek in greeting. He bent to Nea's ear, keeping his eyes on the giant bird. "What am I doing here?"

"Spider wanted to meet you. Since she cannot come, she sent her eyes. This is a rare honour, Thomas. Without him she is blind." She then turned and introduced the two. Thomas had the confused wit to remain a gentleman, treating the bird as he would any person.

"Now I know how Alice felt," he mumbled with an embarrassed grin.

The bird crossed to him, looking him up and down, walking around him. She could feel Thomas stiffen a little in uncertainty beside her, unsure of what the bird was going to do, but he did nothing to offend the raven.

Suddenly the bird gave a raucous laugh, something Nea had never seen or heard of him doing, and hopped back to his place. He clapped his beak over his shoulder at something unseen, turned back and watched the pair. Gaganan's head went up. He looked first at the raven then at something behind Nea and Thomas. There was merry amusement in the raven's ancient eyes. Thomas looked over at Nea in confusion, then down at the cat and followed his gaze. He looked behind them but saw nothing. "What is he seeing?" he asked softly. "What is going on? Am

The Speaker

I the brunt of a joke?”

Gaganan snickered, *You think?* he quipped, then suddenly twisted, started to hiss, but the hiss died in his throat. He frowned, sat up, tail curling around his front paws as he contemplated something that confounded him. He turned one ear to the laughing raven, glanced at Thomas, then at Nea. He gave a half chitter at the air whose meaning Nea could not decipher. To her it sounded like *Whahahatheha?* She arched an eyebrow and turned back to the raven.

I take it he passes inspection? she asked him.

Zoongizi nodded. *He is to be brought home. Tell him... tell him the story of the mountain. ...and keep him with you when you can.*

She bowed. “Thank you, elder Zoongizi.” She took a small felt bag out of her hip pouch, held it out to the bird with the strings spread open between her hands. “This is for Spider, for thanks. It is tobacco and tea.”

The bird cocked his enormous head. *Together?* he frowned.

She smiled indulgently. “No, Zoongizi, they are separated inside. Two bags.”

What kind?

“A black cherry Virginia I found in a pipe shop in Clarkston and the other is a blend of Chinese green and silver needle. Tell her to brew it short. It won’t take a long steeping, only a couple minutes. She should like it. Have her tell Meme or the Southbends if she does when I call in a couple weeks. I’ll bring her more.”

The bird nodded, reached out to take the strings in his bill. Clamping it tight, he opened his wings and leapt into the air. Thomas closed his eyes and protected his face as the wind from the bird’s giant wings kicked up dirt and debris from the ground. Even the fire was stirred up and Nea had to stamp out a few embers that tried to escape.

Thomas looked up into the sky, looking for the bird. “Where’d he go?”

She chuckled, began kicking out the fire. “Into the trees. He will fly home in the morning, when it’s light.”

“Oh,” he muttered, began to help her with the fire. “Did I... did I pass inspection?”

She laughed in earnest. “Yes, yes you did. From him at least. The Great Spirit only knows what my aunt will say, but pay her no mind. If she hates you... everybody else will love you just to spite her.”

He winced, taking her arm to escort her back to campus. “That bad?”

She nodded. “Though I am beginning to think it is not for the same reasons I once believed.”

“Oh?”

The Speaker

“I’ll tell you when it’s time. But not tonight. I... still have to sort things out.”

They clung to each other in silence on the long walk back to Randal Hall. Gaganan trailed along behind them, keeping an eye out and holding an unintelligible conversation with one spirit or another. Thomas left her with a kiss, had to pull himself away.

As Nea went inside and headed up the staircase to the third floor, she suddenly felt something breathing on the back of her neck. She turned at the landing, only to feel herself nudged forward as if by an overly friendly horse. She frowned at Gaganan who was sitting on the top step watching. “Gaganan, what is that? What just happened?”

He just chuckled. *Oh, testing a theory. Tell Moose thank you and good night.*

“Um, thank you and goodnight, Moose?” she echoed, uncertain what it was all about. Nothing else happened. She looked down at the cat, frowned. *Explain.*

He sighed, gave a feline shrug and crossed to the door, reaching up to let himself onto the floor. *The spirits cannot touch your young brave. While he is with you... they can’t touch you either.* With that he trotted down the hall to the bathroom.



Hecuba, Julia and Thomas met Nea down in one of the private study rooms on the first floor of Randall Hall. As Nea went to close the door, another student tried to squeeze in. “Sorry, private meeting,” Nea said firmly. “Try another room.”

“But they’re all full,” he complained.

“Then come back in an hour,” she said, still trying to close the door.

Hecuba strode across the tiny room, pulled the door open wide. She was wearing a green dress so dark it was almost black and looking quite venomous. Her hair was a nest of stiff tendrils left over from a theatre party from the night before, giving her a very medusa-like air. She curled her lip as she glared fiercely at the boy. He took an involuntary step back. Without a word she slammed the door in his face.

She pulled a thin black ribbon off her wrist and tied it around the doorknob as she locked it, pressed a kiss to her fingers and transferred it to the knob. Then she turned around and smiled, looking positively chipper. “Now,” she said, traipsing over to her seat and dropping into it, “I think we can safely call this meeting to order.”

The Speaker

The others just stared at her, as thrown by her current cheerfulness as by her sudden outburst of venom. She laughed. “What? I got rid of him, didn’t I? Now, you wanted to discuss the wedding?”

Nea shook off her shock and sat down next to Thomas. “Yea. Ok. I don’t think I have to tell you that you cannot speak of the ‘special’ things you will see there. That is rule number one.” They nodded. “You can pretty much go anywhere you want on the reservation with a couple exceptions, and those it’s just best you don’t go alone. There are plenty of trails in the mountains, hiking, horse-back riding... I’m sure Johnny will be happy to loan you horses. Just ...don’t *take* from the mountain. You are free to accept the gifts it offers, but don’t *take* anything.”

Julia frowned. “And how are we to know the difference?”

Hecuba tucked her feet up under her. “Don’t *pick* anything. If you find something interesting, a flashy rock, a feather, a dead butterfly... you can pick it up, but if it resists... leave it lie.”

“Exactly,” Nea nodded. “You can pick fruit if you’re going to eat it, but I don’t think there will be many wild berries out yet. Hecuba, if you want to harvest some herbs and things, Anang can take you gathering. She knows how to appease the mountain.”

“You speak of the mountain as if it were a living thing,” Thomas commented.

Nea sighed, uncomfortable with the subject. “There is more to it than that. Whatever you do, if you go riding or hiking alone, stay on the paths. Even a deer track is still a path. If you suddenly find yourself off the trail and don’t hear any birds, or insects or animals... turn around and head down hill immediately and do not look back. That is the only other *real* rule, and it is a life or death one, and not just your lives either.”

Thomas sat forward and took her hand, sensing her disturbance. “Just what is up there that scares you so much?”

She sighed, reaching into her backpack at her feet. “I am not afraid of Him, so much as I respect Him. He is as much a part of my heritage as the colour of my hair and the magic in my blood.” She pulled out a library book on First Nation legends, opened to a marked page and slid it in front of Thomas. “I think you might know this one.”

Thomas ran his fingertips over the picture on the opposite page, a great rearing serpent with seven bands of colour along its neck and a scintillating jewel in the centre of its head between horns. “Uktena,” he whispered.

The Speaker

Nea placed her fingers on his lips. "Please. Not around me. Not at the mountain. This word we do not say... not there. That is the last rule. It calls His attention, and when on the mountain you stand at His feet."

Hecuba frowned. "But you've said it before."

"That was before I knew, and never at home."

Thomas was deeply shocked at how seriously she took this, that she believed a monster like this lived and breathed. But, he added to himself as he slid the book over to Hecuba and Julia, she turns into animals, so why could such a thing not exist in one form or another. If nothing else as a manifestation of their belief in such a magical society and place. "Why... why hasn't anyone killed it?"

She looked at him as if no one had ever thought of that. "Why would we? He is a sacred trust. He protects our people, and as such we... protect His privacy and respect Him. He *is* the mountain."

Hecuba looked up from the story, having speed-read the thing, passed it to Julia who was still trying to read the page-long legend. "Has anyone in living memory seen this thing?"

"I believe my aunt did," Nea said.

"Might explain a few things," Hecuba replied, sat back. "Why your home?"

"There is a legend about the mountain itself. It's not in any book," she continued. "Back in the days when the miners were looking for any trace of precious metal they found silver on the peak. There is supposed to be a mine up there, but as far as the surveyors and geologists are concerned, it is empty and too dangerous to approach. The mine was plagued with disasters ever since it was opened. There is a single rock there, a natural boulder which bears a peculiar vein. It is in the shape of a wild rose. All efforts to mine further or remove that stone have resulted in misfortune and death. It is from that stone the mountain gets its name.

"Finally, unable to use the territory themselves, they gave it back to the Mainganoden for a reservation. Once we discovered what the mountain held we made peace with it. Or we had always known, I don't know. Only Spider could tell you for certain. We don't go there, not without reason, not within a kilometre of the peak. Some say the rose is actually the heart of Him, slain by one of our ancestors and lost, like the man of the story," she said, pointing to the book. "The one who buried it so that no other would be burdened with its care. But still it protects the tribe as He promised before He was slain. We have not been invaded by white men. Our property was not taken from us. We are left in peace, and so we are able to hide safely what we are from the outside world, take in others like us, to teach and

nourish in secure secrecy and spread magic slowly back into the world.”

Julia was just staring open mouthed.

Hecuba leaned forward on the table. “We will abide by the rules. At least a kilometre from the peak. In fact, we won’t go wandering without a Mainganoden guide. It would only be polite.”

“Thank you. You may think it just a legend,” she added. “But I’m living proof it’s real.”

Thomas frowned, caught unexpectedly by this new information. “How so?”

“Zoongizi hinted that...”

Julia interrupted. “Zooweezi?”

Nea chuckled. “Zoongizi,” she corrected. “It means ‘solid’. He is the niiji manidoo of a tribal elder who came to see me. He’s a giant raven.”

“Big!” Thomas mouthed, spreading his hands wide.

Julia giggled.

“Anyway. He told me that my aunt had followed a vision quest to see Him,” she pointed at the book again, indicating Uktena. “They say to look on Him is Death, but to see Him sleeping and run away is to lose everything you love. Apparently my aunt ran, and only loved two things in this world.”

“Man, that’s gotta suck,” Julia breathed.

“Your aunt never loved you even a little bit?” Hecuba asked.

Nea shrugged. “Who knows. I’m too young to remember and no one will tell me. They do not speak of it. All I know is there was no reason for the car to overturn with nothing in the road. There is no reason I should have survived that wreck.” She turned to Thomas. “I have a silver streak... in my hair.”

Julia gaped. “You what? You never told me...”

“I never wanted anyone to know. I was trained as a child to hide it. In fact, it’s the reason Hecuba and I... the reason I invited her to the smoke.”

“Well I’ll be damned,” Julia exclaimed, sitting back.

“This strand,” she said, fingering it, “is pure silver. I mean *real* silver. You can feel the difference.” Thomas reached out and touched it, surprised by the difference in texture from the strands beside it.

Hecuba nodded knowingly.

Nea continued. “It won’t take normal dyes, only magic will hide it. It is apparently His mark. When the moon touches it, reflects off it... He can find me. And right now I don’t want to be found.”

The Speaker

“What will He do if He finds you?” Thomas asked quietly. He felt strangely subdued.

“I have no idea. But the elders saw fit to hide me from Him for this long. I can only expect they were wise in this. I imagine He would be fiercely displeased should He wake and I not be on the mountain, in His reach. He would take His wrath out upon my people, that much I am certain of.”

“But He knows you are here,” Hecuba said. “Gaganan said He spoke through the board when he tried to tell me His name.”

Nea shrugged. “To that I have no answer. And neither did Zoongizi. Another mystery. I will find out, I suppose, soon enough.”



Midterms crept up on them. One Friday night, the group planned a study group. The girls commandeered a study room at the Student Union, a comfortable lounge with deep sofas for reading, tables and chairs for writing and a near sound-proof atmosphere. Julia made enough brownies for a small army and Hecuba had brought a cooler which she and Nea had filled with assorted store brand sodas.

Nea headed down to the small convenience store in the Union building to get ice. When she returned, Hecuba and Julia were head to head over a sketch pad. “Yeah, I think we can pull it off. Miko will have no problems....” Hecuba looked up sharply, cutting off her sentence when she saw Nea. Julia swiftly covered up the drawings, closing the pad.

“Hi!” she piped.

“What... what are you two up to?” she frowned, suddenly suspicious.

“Nothing!” exclaimed Julia, putting the pad under Hecuba’s purse. Nea stared at the two of them with her fist on her hip, not buying it.

“She was just... showing me some sketches for the costumes for next term’s production,” Hecuba said, covering quickly.

“Yea,” Julia smiled, taking the cover quickly.

“I asked her to design something,” Hecuba continued. “I’m producing this one and I wanted something a bit... different.”

“Oh cool, can I see?” Nea asked, setting the bag of ice on top of the cans already in the cooler.

“No!” they both exclaimed.

The Speaker

“That is... I want it to be a total surprise,” Hecuba covered, a little less smoothly. “I only talked to Julia about it cause... I needed someone to draw my ideas.”

“Yea, so no peeking,” Julia teased. “We’ll talk about it later.”

Nea shrugged and started to unbag the ice.

The girls were already camped out when Thomas arrived with his roommate carrying two gallons of milk and plastic cups. “You said there would be brownies!” he announced, began finding room in the cooler for the jugs.

Henry dropped the books on the coffee table, began sorting out his own and found a spot on the sofa. He watched Nea pass Thomas a brownie on a napkin that was already on the table, noticed one on the table in front of him and helped himself. He was poised to take a bite when an acid voice above him snapped, “That is *my* brownie, fuzzy. And my spot.”

He looked up, stared into the dark, smouldering eyes of Hecuba. Her blood red lips were scowling between the strands of her loose black hair which fell forward as she leaned over the back of the couch to relieve him of the purloined confection. He stared straight up, dumbfounded at her tightly corseted chest, trapped by the faint scent of lotus and jasmine. Pressed so close to her, he noticed a reddish-brown tattoo of a serpent beginning to peer out at him where her breast struggled to slip its bonds. She stood again, rattling a silver bangled wrist in his direction, “Move it, knave,” she growled. “Or I’ll use you for a toad.”

He shifted with a frown. “I thought this was a study group, not a séance,” he quipped, glancing over her black lace and gauze dress. He reached for a brownie off the plate.

She gave him the once over, from his bushy, tight curled hair of honey brown to his loose white arrow collared shirt with a quilted denim vest hanging open and his worn out blue jeans with photo-chemical stains on them. She curled her lip, “This coming from the guy who’s still stuck in the seventies?”

The others watched the exchange, caught in the moment, not sure what to think of things as the two sat on opposite sides of the same couch and threw daggers at each other.

Henry pulled his vest a little more closed. “At least I’m reasonably warm, unlike some people. In fact,” he lowered his gaze to her bosom, pulling on a pair of tortoiseshell glasses, feigning acute myopia to peer at them, “I can clearly see you could use a sweater.”

The Speaker

“At least I’m not wearing pants so tight you can tell my religion,” she snapped with a superior arch of the brow and bit pointedly into her brownie.

Henry shifted uncomfortably at that, adjusting his position. “Wow, no fangs. I really expected fangs,” he parried.

She humphed, reaching for her chemistry book. “Shows your ignorance. A real vampire wouldn’t flash them until they needed them. By the time you notice them, it’s too late. Of course, we all know where *your* eyes would be. I rather believe you’d feel them before you saw them.” She opened the book in her lap and ignored him in a very feline way.

Wow, Gaganan quipped from under the coffee table. *I’m impressed,* he said, wide-eyed. *More cat than snake it seems.*

Henry opened his mouth to retort when Thomas cleared his throat. He looked at his roommate. “Um, can we... study? Fight later?”

Julia crossed to Henry and held out her hand in her very straight-forward manner, “I don’t believe as we were properly introduced. I’m Julia.” He shook her hand, still a little unsettled by the block of ice on the other end of the couch. “I believe you must be Thomas’s roommate?”

“Henry, Henry Braebury,” he stammered.

“Pleased t’ meet’cha,” she said. “I’m Nea’s roommate, that’s her over next t’ Thomas, but I guess you’ve either met or figured that out by now. And Miss Snakebite, next to ya, is Hecuba, from down the hall.”

Hecuba just grunted, pulling a silver chalice from her purse and filling it from an unmarked amber bottle in the cooler. It smoked a little bit going into the cup.

Thomas leaned into Nea as Julia dropped down onto the floor in between the couch and the coffee table. “What’s gotten into her?”

Julia leaned back in a not so soft whisper. “It’s *that time*, and it’s not bein’ kind.”

His eyebrows disappeared into his hair.

Hecuba glowered at her over the chalice’s lip. “Your time is coming, dear heart. And we’ll see if I share the contents of my teapot with you.”

Julia just made a face at her.

Nea moved the brownie plate closer to Hecuba. “Just do not get between her and the chocolate and no one’ll get hurt.”

Henry snorted.

“Is this a private group or can anybody join?”

The Speaker

Julia popped up like jack in the box and was across the room before anyone else could turn.

Like pet like master, Gaganan said, rolling his eyes. He got up onto the couch between Thomas and Nea, making sure he was nestled in where he could eye both books they were reading at his whim.

“Willie!” she squealed, throwing herself into his arms before he could get his coat off.

He laughed, dropped his bag to kiss her, lifting her off the ground. “Sorry, I’m late, but class ran over. Professor Winston does like to run on.”

“Windbag Winston strikes again!” Henry and Thomas said together.

William looked up, slightly embarrassed, as if suddenly realizing there were other people in the room. “Oh, I,.. uh...,” he withered under Hecuba’s glare. “If I’m intruding, I can go.... Julia said you were having a study night and... my dorm’s a little noisy on the weekends.”

“I invited you,” Julia insisted, pulling him over. “You’re staying. I made brownies,” she tempted.

“*That’s* why she made so many,” Hecuba growled without looking up.

Nea looked over at her and smiled while Thomas and Henry made the goalie welcome. She noticed fresh henna tattooing on Hecuba’s hands and temple, a tiny lotus mark between her brows. Hecuba glanced up under the scrutiny, looked at her wrist when Nea tapped her own in question.

“I spent the afternoon with Riti and Roma. They... helped me meditate away the pain. ...and had a little calming fun while they were at it,” she said with a half grin. She tugged at the lace edge of her corset, pulling up an inch of breast to expose the head of a hennaed snake.

Nea’s smile broadened. “Did it help?” she asked.

Hecuba shrugged. “The chakka work did, a bit. I’m here, aren’t I? Not curled up in a fetal position.”

Nea left her alone, snuggling back against Thomas over the cat who had attracted William’s attention. He was gaping over his ‘size and magnificence’ which pleased Gaganan to no end. By the end of the night, the goalie had composed an ode to his ‘kingly splendour’, and was pleased as punch at having found a subject for his literature homework.

“Bad patch of luck though, Thomas, with your Cyrano letter getting lost like that,” William said after he had read his small effort aloud to the group. “Good thing, Professor Marchand already graded it.”

Nea frowned, looked at Thomas. “You two are in the same Lit class?”

The Speaker

Thomas frowned, “Yeah. And my paper didn’t get lost, it was lifted.”

William was shocked. “What? How? Oh, must have been when that girl fainted. Perfect time for it. Hell, it was damned good enough for someone to want to pilfer it.”

The girls were paying attention now, looking from Thomas to William.

Thomas shrugged. “There was no harm done in the end,” he said calmly. “The girl it was given to knows who wrote it,” he added, pressing his temple to the top of Nea’s head.

Even Gaganan looked up at him.

William laughed. “You mean to tell me, that whoever stole it, gave it to the girl you wrote it for?”

He nodded, and now it was Nea’s turn to laugh. “Yeah. Might even have worked except... well, the words did not match the man.” She turned to face Thomas. “So you mean to tell me this fabulous love letter of yours was part of a class assignment?”

He was flustered. “It was just an excuse, an inspiration, an outlet. I wasn’t sure how to approach you and we were reading *Cyrano De Bergerac* and ... well... let’s just say the old bird loaned me his muse.”

“Roxanne never had it so good,” Hecuba quipped.

“So it was read aloud to the class?” Nea continued. Thomas nodded. “AND?” she prompted, elbowing him. Gaganan butted his head against his hand, putting in his two cents.

William laughed. “And Jonah read it so well, some poor girl in the front row fainted!” he crowed.

“*Jonah?*” shouted all three girls at once. Hecuba winced as she sat up suddenly, reached for her chalice.

Nea looked deep into Thomas’s bi-coloured eyes. “Jonah read it out loud?”

He sighed. “Yes, he did. He changed things, but ...he got a favourable reaction from the class.”

“I’ll say this, Jacobi is quite a showman when he wants to be,” William said, “when a woman is involved.” He curled his arm around Julia, “Do me a favour, don’t ever attract his attention?”

Julia laughed. “As if?”

“Hey, it’s possible. And I don’t want to lose you.”

The others pointedly paid attention to something else as the two started sweet-talking each other and smooching.

The Speaker

“Explains how he got a hold of it,” said Henry, setting the spine of his book on his thigh, his finger marking his place.

Thomas nodded.

“So... every one’s work was read?” Hecuba asked, her eyes narrowed at she reached for more brownies.

“How was his?” Nea asked.

Thomas began rubbing Gaganan’s ruff, setting off loud purrs that could easily be heard across the room. “Narcissistic. He went on about his subject’s kiss granting him a godhead or something. It was all about what she could give him or do for him, not how she made him feel or what he would do to have her. It was all ‘when he had her.’”

Hecuba’s eyes stayed on him intently.

Thomas tightened his arm around Nea. “It frightens me to think he was writing about you. ...in light of what we know,” he added in a whisper.

Hecuba interrupted what might have devolved into a kiss. “Can you remember what his said?”

He shook his head. “Not really. But I’m sure Professor Marchand still has a copy. It would be just like her to keep a copy of everything he’s written.”

Hecuba filed this bit of knowledge away and went back to her reading.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:

Standing on Ceremony

When the week-long Easter break began, Nea, Thomas, Hecuba and Julia, accompanied by respective pets climbed into a van borrowed by Joseph and Anang from friends. Thomas and Nea sat in the back row, curled up together in relative comfort. Lulabelle's cage was nestled beside them, and a thick blanket lay on the top of it for Gaganan to curl up on comfortably if he wanted. Hecuba sat in the middle row on the farthest seat from the cage, frequently stroking the bag hanging around her neck under her shirt, next to Julia who kept glancing back to make sure the sleeping ferret was all right. The trip was uneventful, fourteen straight hours on Yellowhead Highway one way or another with two stops for fuel and leg-stretching/calls of nature, one which included a brief picnic at a roadside overlook. The view was breathtaking. Making good time, they pulled onto the reservation road in time for a long house dinner.

Once swarms of fosters and well-wishers had welcomed those they knew, introductions were made for the rest and they were drawn to the table. Thomas and Julia were surprised to see a place set for Gaganan as well, with a sturdy prop to raise him to table level and a smaller plate with a bowl instead of a cup. Hecuba elbowed Julia to get her to stop gaping and discreetly pointed out a couple other animals similarly situated. There were five in all, scattered among both adults and children. Julia leaned into Nea, "Does this mean I can bring Lulabelle?"

Nea looked towards the Chief.

The Speaker

“What is this Lulabelle?” he asked.

“A ferret,” Nea answered.

“If you can make her behave herself, but she will have to do without a seat of her own,” he answered, nodding.

Julia thanked him and darted back to the van.

Wisely, Nea mixed the seating arrangement up a bit, making sure that Hecuba would be on the other side of Thomas and herself from Julia.

Nea had a few words with the ferret about her behaviour and was assured she would be table perfect. She perched on Julia’s shoulder and took in the scents.

The fare was simple but delicious and abundant. Nea gazed over the table, noticed that about seventy percent of the tribe was there, along with varied guests which included a tall, slightly overweight woman Nea did not recognize sitting next to Meme. She noticed quickly that she had a very dominant personality, totally overshadowing the lean little man beside her. She also took note of who was not there, namely her aunt. But that was expected.

About halfway through the meal, Thomas leaned into Nea and asked quietly, “So which one is the aunt I have to watch out for?”

“The one who’s gonna waylay Anang in about twenty minutes,” said Tuwe, his eyes kind of glazed over.

Thomas frowned, glanced from Tuwe to Nea. She explained. “Tuwe is Lizard’s. He dreams while he is awake sometimes. He sees the future most of the time, occasionally the past.”

“Rarely,” he sighed.

Thomas lit on an idea, a smile crossing his face. “Say, can Lizard tell me if Professor Jameson is going to put the Labrador-Metis tribe on the test?” he grinned.

Tuwe paused, stared blankly at some spot on the table then said, “He will not say, but tells me to introduce you to Gibuu later. You will want to talk at length with him.”

Thomas nodded, thanked him, even though he had no idea why.

Hecuba leaned around Thomas to see Nea, “Hey, Nea. You think your aunt would talk with me? About the potion stuff? I mean, you said she was the best and... well,” she chuckled. “I’m not above learning new potions even if they are from a different practice.”

She thought about it for a long moment. “Let Anang ask for you. She doesn’t really like whites much, very prejudiced. But she likes Anang and might if she asks.”

The Speaker

“Ok,” she said and promptly turned to Anang and asked her.

Shortly thereafter, the Chief stood up to speak. The room obediently fell quiet. “All right. I said all my welcome speaking at the beginning of dinner, so I will not repeat myself. But arrangements must be made for the newly arrived guests.” He turned to the six of them. “Forgive me breaking you up, but no one place is large enough. Redbird, you and our lovely Star will stay with her Foster parents,” the couple nodded from across the table. “Their children are now grown and they have room again. Miss Julia, Miss Hecuba,”

“Raven!” Tuwe corrected. “That one is Raven, sir.”

Falling Elk raised his brow. “We shall discuss that later, young lizard.” He turned back. “You two young ladies will be at my sister Mitena’s,” he indicated an older woman who’s hair, unlike that of her brother, was still raven. “Sooneawa, you shall bunk at my house tonight. Mr. Thomas, you are to go with Tuwe.” He waved his arms at the gathering. “Go on! Go home!” he laughed.

People immediately began to get up, gathering dishes and what few leftovers there were. Nea’s friends listened, fascinated as people began bargaining for some of the leavings. “Hey, scrape me the fat and that bone, I want it for my dogs.” “Not on your life, I’ll give you my first elderberry pie of the season for that hambone! I’m making soup for the wedding feast.” All parties stopped. “What kind of soup?” “Seven bean.” Six people shouted simultaneously, “Give her the bone!”

Conversations like this were going on down the tables. Mitena led the two girls off to her home while Anang and Joseph reacquainted themselves with her foster family. Nea and Thomas stole a quick, semi-private kiss before she obediently followed the chief, leaving Thomas in the dubious care of the dreamy Tuwe and his brother.

Thomas found the house a cozy blend of native design and modern convenience. It was a split log affair with limited furnishings in the front room, though there were plenty of fur rugs spread before the fireplace which dominated the room. The mantle had a few pictures on it, of older people in the family and several elaborately carved antlers. There was a very den-like feel to the room. Tuwe’s mother met them in the kitchen door, cleaning her hands on an apron. She was a large woman that reminded him very much of a beaver. From behind her drifted incredible smells from a kitchen that looked like it had been last renovated sometime in the late fifties.

“You bring my casserole dish home?” she asked.

Tuwe’s brother held it up.

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“Put it on the counter. So, this Nea’s niinimoshenh?” she asked, nodding her head in Thomas’s direction.

Thomas blushed. Niinimoshenh meant sweetheart. It seemed the whole tribe knew his intentions.

“Careful, ma,” Tuwe laughed. “He speaks.”

“Not well,” he said, clearing his throat nervously.

“Well enough,” Tuwe said, clapping his hand on his shoulder. “Ma, Thomas. My mother Amikgidagaa. Good-night, mother. Night, Newin,” he waved to his brother and quickly guided Thomas away from his mother.

He took him down a short hall to the last room and quickly ducked inside, flicking on a lamp. Thomas noticed that his bag was already in the room. The second thing he noticed was the absence of beds. Instead, a pair of hammocks decorated the west corner of the room criss-cross from one another so they were not directly above or below one another. A third had been strung from one of the previous hooks to one in the centre. The last thing he noticed was the terrarium on the east wall in which an albino python lay coiled.

“Wow,” was all he could find to say.

Tuwe chuckled. “Some snake, huh? Not phobic are you?”

Thomas shook his head.

“Good, cause some nights he gets out.” Thomas shot him a nervous glance, grinned when he saw the look in the man’s eye. “Nah, Newinnoodin fixed that after the first time. Middle sling’s yours,” he said dropping into his own and peeling off his shoes.

“Space saver?” Thomas asked, sitting down in one of the two desk chairs to unlace his sneakers.

Tuwe nodded, sat observing him. “And cheaper. More comfortable I think. But I will have to get used to a bed I guess. Bought one for Meme in Dauphin. She doesn’t know yet though. Big feather mattress. Saved all winter for it. My grandmother gave me the frame. My grandfather carved it for their marriage bed sixty years ago. She doesn’t need it anymore.”

Thomas set aside his boots neatly under the desk by his bag. “Passed on?”

He shook his head, grinning like a bobcat. “She sleepin’ at the chief’s house now. ‘Bout time too.”

Thomas chuckled, shaking his head as he dug pajamas out of his bag. “So what all is planned for tomorrow? Any pre-ceremony rituals you have to do? Sweat-lodge, fasti... well tonight would have ruined that,” he said as he realized it. He was starting to feel awkward. He didn’t feel this out of place when he had stayed with

The Speaker

Joseph's tribe last summer. But then... he hadn't been in love with him, or fearful that the tribe would tell him they could not be friends.

Tuwe shook his head again. "Nah, did that months ago. Tomorrow is just for powwow. Meme an' I been married for months. Just couldn't do the tribal celebration until the weather was better."

Thomas's jaw dropped. "But... Nea's been going on about this... the importance of the ceremony...."

Tuwe laughed, folding his feet under him without rocking the hammock more than an inch or two. "Well, tomorrow *is* a big deal. We go to take care of the 'official' stuff, you know, the papers. While we're gone, the tribe puts together the powwow. Sort of to present the couple to the tribe official. A 'You survived the winter without killing each other, so we'll accept you as a separate family now,' party. And believe me, that was no mean task for us," he chuckled. "But fun. Always with her, never boring."

"If you've been married, how come you're sleeping here and not with her?" Thomas asked, changing. He was getting more comfortable, asking questions. He would need the answers to these particular ones eventually.

"Marriage for us is not like marriage for the white man. We do not have to have a priest or a justice bless the union. For us it is sacred enough. Once the families are agreed, you move in. You hold a powwow to celebrate when the weather's good. That's mostly for the gifts, to give to the in-laws and to receive gifts to help the new couple out. Meme's tribe on the other hand... her clan have other rules, her parents have other rules. They are Christian. As a blended culture we respect that. So, for their sake, we sleep apart for a week until the powwow when we walk together into our new home."

"Which that she-bear had better like," snapped Newin, coming into the room rolling down his sleeves. His hands bore evidence of having been roped into washing dishes. "I spent all winter building that beaver-dam."

"You had help," Tuwe said, laying back in his bed.

"When you were awake."

"I only fell asleep on the roof the once. The sun was nice and warm that day," he defended himself, closing his eyes and folding his arms behind his head.

Newin held up four fingers to Thomas with an expression that had Thomas trying not to laugh out loud.

"I saw that," Tuwe growled.

The Speaker

Thomas tucked his clothes neatly back into his pack and headed for his hammock. “I know someone who’d love to see that snake of yours, Newin,” he said.

The young man perked up. “Really? Who?”

Thomas didn’t answer for a moment as he struggled to situate himself in the sling without getting pitched out. “Hecuba, the black-haired girl who came with us. She’s got one in a bag around her neck.”

“Raven,” Tuwe explained. His brother nodded, as if that was all he had needed to know who he was talking about. He had a gleam in his eye as he stripped to his shorts and hopped into his own sling. “And don’t get your hopes up. Goona might enjoy the introduction, but Raven has her heart set on a certain bat...”

“Bat?” Thomas asked, watched Tuwe’s hammock start swaying gently with no visible help.

“Hmhmhm,” he murmured. “They don’t know it yet. But it’ll happen. People like that love to fight and fight to love... like Meme...”

Newin held his fingers to his lips as his brother’s voice drifted off into occasional but incoherent mumble. He shook his head gently at Thomas. Thomas mouthed, ‘Are you sure? How can you tell?’ Newin shrugged with a grin. Thomas chalked it up to experience.

“You settled?” Newin whispered. When Thomas nodded, he sat up in his hammock and blew at the electric lamp by the door. It obediently clicked off.



Nea spent a comfortable night curled up with Gaganan on a bear-skin rug in front of the fireplace. Seven Trees woke her early, just after Falling Elk had gone out for his morning walk, and brought Nea into the bedroom she shared with the chief to get her ready. Nea changed into a beaded dress. It was nice but not drum circle fancy. Seven Trees helped to brush out her hair and re-braid it.

She admired the new feathers on the wraps as she tied them on. “Meme said they found a white feather in your hand when they got to the hospital. That it?”

Nea smiled. “Yes.”

Seven Trees took in that look and nodded knowingly. “He gave it to you, eh?”

Nea blushed. “It’s a swan feather. He said he found it on his windshield on the way to the hospital.”

Seven Trees frowned. “In the middle of winter?”

The Speaker

“Snow and everything.”

“Not accident then. Someone hard at work,” she mused, referring to some spirit or another. “Has an interesting aura though,” she continued, making sure the braids were even and the beads on the wraps lay straight. “Pity you can’t see them. It’s pale. Not dim, *pale*, like the colours you can’t see.”

You gonna tell her about the Moose experiment? asked Gaganan, washing his face on the dresser.

No, she replied. *Not right now anyway.*

Put a move on, then. Meme’s getting frustrated with her mother.

Sent a spirit to rush me, did she?

No, he said, pausing in his grooming to swat away something annoying him. *But you know how stressed a butterfly can get when there is conflict in the air?*

Nea giggled. *No. I’ve never had the privilege.*

He growled. *Well, they’re down right annoying. So get a move on before this one expires of anxiety.*

“Well, you are as ready as I can make you,” Seven Trees announced, stepping back to admire her work. “Love that necklace,” she said, fingering the choker.

“Julia gave it to me for my birthday. It’s Haida made.”

“Good magic there. Strength, courage, playfulness, the shape-changer. Very good medicine. She has a good eye.”

Nea smiled as she headed for the door. “She’s an artist, of course she has a good eye.”



Hecuba and Julia were awakened early by Mitena’s three teenaged grand-daughters. After a quick breakfast of left-over fry-cakes and fresh milk, the trio dragged both of them back to the room to get them ready. Before the morning was too far along, both felt like a pair of dolls being dressed for a tea-party.



Thomas’s morning proceeded with far less fuss and hassle. Newin, being more Thomas’s size, loaned him some clothes, a set of well-worn buckskins that were soft as butter inside and out. Breakfast was a quick, hand-held affair of raw apples and

The Speaker

refried cornmeal cakes that the boys dipped in a bowl of honey while sitting by the hearth in the den. Amikgidagaa was a formidable woman who, still cooking, refused to allow them to enter the kitchen. The meager breakfast she said would hold them until the feast.

“When do you leave?” Thomas asked, refilling his glass from the earthenware jug on the hearthstone.

Tuwe shrugged. “In about an hour. Whenever Meme can escape her mother. Oh, I want to show you something.”

He got up and darted back into the bedroom.

Newin nodded his head towards Thomas’s feet as he reached over his brother’s plate and nipped one of his thin cakes. “So how they fit?”

Thomas wiggled his toes. “They’re a little loose, but the thick socks balanced that out a bit.”

“Thought they might be, but they were all I could find. Dad was a bit... bigger than me and I’ve only got the one pair. Well, and my mukluks, but it’s too warm for those,” he shrugged.

“Was?” Newin nodded. Thomas nodded back. “Mine too. About six years ago. ‘Course he was seventy-five at the time so it wasn’t a big shock.”

Newin suddenly laughed. “Sorry, not appropriate,” he apologized when Thomas gave him a strange look. “Mine’s not dead,” he explained. “Tuwe’s father is, when he was five I think, some fever. Mine... Mama threw him out. He was a good for nothing, had no respect. He wasn’t a wonder worker so he moved back to his people. Prince Edward Isle, I think, maybe. We don’t have any contact. She don’t need a man anyhow. She’s worth three men herself,” he laughed.

“Beaver medicine,” Tuwe said returning, as if that explained everything.

Thomas glanced over his shoulder at the woman humming away in the kitchen tending to three burners, a mixing bowl and the oven all at once. Actually, it did explain a few things. He turned back to the box Tuwe held as if it contained a bar of solid gold. “So what is that? Your wedding rings or your wedding present for Meme?” he guessed.

Tuwe grinned. “Both. Better.” He opened the box proudly. Even his brother was eager to look. Inside the box was a pair of eagle feathers, identical down to the markings. Their calami, the part that went into the bird, were wrapped with red thread and adorned with tourmaline beads and a length of sinew to attach them to something else.

Newin smiled. “You did good with them. Meme going to jump you for sure.”

The Speaker

Thomas took a guess at what they were. “Twin feathers,” he sighed.

It took him a few moments of silence to realize both brothers were regarding him, though in different ways.

“I’m sorry. I just... wouldn’t mind finding a pair myself.”

“You got native plans?” Newin asked, his expression unreadable.

“Entirely possible. Provided I don’t screw up royally this week,” he sighed. “But it’d never be legal and I’d never be lucky enough...”

Tuwe set his hand on Thomas’s shoulder. “My friend. If the spirits want you to have them, they will find a way to you. Though how they gonna touch you, I don’t know. Not even sure they can find you,” he added with a grin. Before Thomas could ask for an explanation, he stood. “I gotta go now. I’m late. Meme’s not good at waiting.”

Thomas watched him go, lost in thought as he finished his breakfast. Newin handed him the plates when he was done, urged him to take them into the kitchen. “What? Invade her kitchen? Are you nuts?” he whispered.

Newin grinned. “Don’t worry, you she won’t ask to wash dishes,” he said and beat a hasty retreat after his brother.

Amikgidagaa stepped out of the kitchen as the front door closed a second time, wiping her hands on her apron. “That boy gonna be late for his own funeral,” she sighed.

Thomas stood up, balancing the plates. She smiled at him. “Thank you, honey. You can just set them in the sink for me. I’ll get my lazy boy to wash them later,” she chuckled. “You are such a good boy.”

Thomas blushed as he carried them into the kitchen. “Smells wonderful,” he said.

“Thank you. Here, try one,” she said, taking a small tartlet filled with candied blueberries and nuts and handing it to him. She popped one in to her own mouth as she bustled about.

Thomas was unable to say anything for several minutes. The pastry was exquisite, the flavors blending and melting in his mouth with all the accompanying emotion of comfort food for all the foreign nature of the confection. All he could do was savour it. Finally, once he had swallowed the last of it, he spoke in Ojibwe, “*You are the most beautiful cook!*” he exclaimed, paused to kiss her cheek. They were not quite the words he had intended to use, but they left her with her hand on her cheek and tears in her eyes, her face beaming with unadulterated joy. She got herself under control quickly, shooed him out of the kitchen and house.

The Speaker

“Go on you, or you’ll miss the asking ritual. And bring some people back with you when they’ve gone, to help me carry all this food.”



Nea ushered Meme out of her foster mother’s house, diplomatically telling her mother that they would be late. Fortunately, Tuwe and his brother were on the steps when they exited. Tuwe stood staring at Meme, a heavy wool blanket carefully crocheted with three gold crosses with a lily border in his arms. Meme was in white buckskins, quilled and beaded in turquoise and red. Her hair was down, held back at the temples by beaded clips with two owl feathers with tufts of white rabbit fur. Her cheeks were in high colour with her fury at her mother’s constant fussing, which only made her more beautiful in Tuwe’s eyes. He liked her best in high passion. Everyone came to a halt on the porch, and even her mother fell silent.

Newin nudged his brother forward and Tuwe snapped out of his stupor, tore his eyes from his wife and moved past her to her mother. “Mother Gannet,” he said formally, bowing slightly and proffered the blanket.

Her eyes ran covetously over the object. “No, I couldn’t. Today we give *you* presents.”

Nea touched her arm gently. “Mrs. Gannet, these are our traditions. We hold to the old ways while respecting the new. Take it. It was made for you. It will bring bad luck if you don’t,” she added the last not because it was true, but because she knew it would move the woman, and... the bad feelings the refusal would sow *could* generate bad luck, if you wanted to look at it that way.

Finally she took the blanket, tears in her eyes. She paused to give her daughter a final kiss on the cheek and went inside the house.

Tuwe turned to his brother and collected the two whole rabbits he held for him, handed them to Meme’s foster mother. “*Mother-in-law*,” he said in Ojibwe.

She accepted them graciously. “*You look fine this morning, Tuwe. Go, get this thing done so I can get this woman out of my house*,” she added in a whisper. “No offence, Memenqua.”

Meme snorted. “I happen to agree with you,” she said, paused to give her a hug and hopped off the porch.

Newin and Nea lead the way, the couple following behind them arm in arm.

“So who’s gonna ask him?” Newin asked nervously.

“You are,” Nea said.

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“ME? Why me?” he squeaked.

“Cause you’re the man and you’re the brother,” she countered.

“You’re older. ...and you know him better. For crying out loud, Silver, when *you* call him grandfather you actually mean it. Not like everyone else and the respect thing.”

She stared at him. “He’s not my grandfather.”

“But you look at him that way.”

Nea growled. Behind her, she heard giggling, chose to ignore it. By the time they neared the chief’s house she was in a fine temper.

There was already a few people milling about, trying to look busy or like innocent passersby. Julia and Hecuba were sitting on a stump in the yard area and Nea waved to them, gave them a ‘hold on just a moment’ gesture and set her foot on the boards of the chief’s porch. Falling Elk was sitting in a rocking chair with his morning tea on the table next to him. “Hey, chief!” she said with less reverence than she was used to.

He raised an eyebrow.

“These two wanna go get hitched,” she said, jerking her thumb behind her.

The chief’s reaction was mild. “They do, huh?” He took a sip of his tea before setting it down and getting up from his chair. Nea took her foot off the porch and stepped aside as he came to the edge, not setting his foot off the boards. He scrutinized the two clinging to each other just eight feet from him. “You two finally gonna go do this? White man legal?”

They nodded.

“Yes, grandfather,” Tuwe said.

He waved his hand with a grunted dismissal as if it were no matter to him. “Fine, off with you,” he said, starting to turn. He paused, reaching into his hip pouch, threw something at them. “Here. Take my truck.”

The keys flew through the air and Newin dove for them. Nea managed to intercept them without much effort, earning her a glare from the young man. Tuwe and Meme smiled, turned and began to walk towards the gate of the reservation where the truck was parked. Newin crowded Nea, trying to get the keys. “I’ll drive,” he said.

“No. I asked. I drive,” she snapped, and shouldered him off. She strode off with a nod and a little wave to her friends. Some of the people who were milling about wandered off, but most of them followed them all the way to the truck.

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Hecuba and Julia followed along, frowning in confusion. They had expected something... different. They were even more confused when Newin got in the back of the pick-up and the bride and groom got in the passenger seat and Nea drove them off the reservation. They stared at each other open mouthed as the on-lookers began finding other things to occupy themselves. "What just happened?" Julia asked. "Where'd they go?"

"Into town to the Justice of the Peace," Thomas explained, coming up behind them.

"But... I thought we were here for the wedding?" Hecuba said.

He chuckled. "Apparently around here a wedding is just an excuse for a party. Which we need to get ready for. Mama Beaver sent me to get some help for setting up. Care to follow me, ladies?"

They followed him, still confused. "Mama Beaver?" Julia frowned.

"Tuwe's mama. Her name is Amikgidagaa, it means Spotted Beaver. And believe me... she'll remind you of a mama beaver!" He led the pair of them off to her house.



Nea drove without incident to the courthouse. "Just tell me you have the license and other paperwork," Nea said to Newin, knowing better than to ask Tuwe.

Newin grinned and reached into the glove compartment. "Had Uncle Johnny stash them in here for me when he parked it at the gate this morning."

There was a short line in the office of the marriage commissioner and they had to wait a few minutes. Tuwe took this time to draw Meme aside and give her the eagle feather. Newin glanced over in time to glimpse the box being opened and covered his ears. He was disappointed. Nea just smiled, giving the pair their privacy. When they came up to the desk, Meme was wiping tears of joy from her cheek and her hand was trembling.

The clerk at the desk took the papers from Tuwe, looked them over and smiled. "Everything is in order. Identifications please?" She checked everyone's ID, did what she had to do document wise and handed back their papers, gesturing them down a narrow hallway. "Could you step over that way for just a moment and the commissioner will be with you shortly."

Nea thought the woman was grinning a little too broadly as they obeyed, found out why when Meme shouted in surprise. "DEDE!"

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Nea looked, tried to see over Newin's head at the man Meme had thrown her arms around.

Meme had not seen her father since she fostered. Her mother, not having agreed 100% with the decision, had tossed him out shortly thereafter, remarried several times before finding a man she could live with. Wasanimose was a tall, strong man, and Meme loved him. Moreover, she respected him like she never respected any of her stepfathers. After the divorce he had taken a job that required a great deal of travel. He had never visited, but had stayed in touch with letters from all over the globe.

"Wouldn't miss this for the world," he grinned, putting her down. He held out his hand to Tuwe. "I will hear about it if you do not take care of my little girl. I may not be Mainganoden, but I have my own way."

"Are you coming back to the reservation for the feasting?" she asked hopefully.

"Is your mother there?" he asked.

She nodded.

He shook his head. "Better I don't. So tell me, what kind of man she replace me with?"

Meme rolled her eyes. "He's a rabbit!"

He chuckled. "Figures. Only a doe or a rabbit would bend to her. Can't have two bulls in the same barn you know. Now you *are* going to tell me you two are already married by tribal way, yes?"

"Since about October, I think," Tuwe said.

"You think?" he frowned.

Meme waved her hand dismissively. "He's caught in Lizard's tail. Doesn't know if today is yesterday or tomorrow sometimes."

"But he loves you, right?"

She held up the eagle feather still in her hand. He looked up at Tuwe who sheepishly held up the mate tied to his braid. Wasanimose nodded, satisfied. "See that you two remember that. Now, I think the Commissioner is ready for you. If you don't mind an extra witness?"

"We would welcome you, *dad*," Tuwe smiled, taking his father in law's hand. "And do not be a stranger from now on. You will be welcome at our home if you need a place to rest your wings for a while."



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Julia and Hecuba sat under the trees with several of the would be revellers, relaxing now that the work was done, waiting for the return of the bride and groom. “That was just the weirdest exchange I’ve ever seen,” Julia was saying. “I mean, I haven’t seen anyone else talk to the chief like that. And, Lord knows I’d never speak to my own grandfather like that. Not in a million years!”

The chief happened to be walking up and chuckled, sat down with his legs crossed on a blanket next to one of his actual grandchildren, and picked up the great-grand baby that was holding up her arms to be held. He situated the child on his lap before he spoke. “That is a strange tradition, yes. Gets more irreverent every year, I think,” he chuckled. “Didn’t help that Newin chickened out. Made Nea angry. She gets cheeky when she’s angry.”

“Would you honour us with its history, Chief?” Thomas asked politely.

Falling Elk looked the young man over, seemed pleased with his manner and nodded. “Not so long ago, the white man imposed his ways on us. A lot of the tribes had their children taken from them, sent to boarding schools and forbidden to practice their ways or their language. We were luckier than most, we are protected,” he said, gesturing to the peak above them. “But we were still forbidden our ceremonies, obvious ways of life we could not hide in secret. Marriage especially. Before this, parents of the couple and the couple themselves would come to chief to make the arrangements, to announce to the tribe their intent and to get him to mediate between the customs if they differed. Even back then we had Dakota marrying Haida Mainganoden and the customs are different, so both ways had to be satisfied. My great-grandfather was negotiating between a Mainganoden man and a Hopi woman’s family when the government man came and said ‘you cannot do it your way. If you will be married, you must go into town and do it right. That is to say ‘our way’. A religious man or a ministry official must marry you. Otherwise it is not legal, no child legitimate.’ Well, my great-grandfather was not happy with this. The young man protested. ‘But I do not have white man’s money to do it your way. To go to the ministry I have to pay dollars when my people will do it for blankets.’

“The government man said, ‘Too bad. Get a job, save it up.’ So those who would speak for them in the marriage said ‘I will give him the money. I will get the licenses for them.’ Then the groom said, ‘But I have no horse to take my bride all the way into town. It is too far for her to walk.’ The government man said, ‘then you cannot get married. Find a way.’ My great-grandfather was pretty fed up by this point. Finally he snapped. ‘You two will be married if you have to take *my* horse

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into town to do it!’ And so they did.

“The next couple who wanted to get married, first they did it our way, in secret, just between the families, then the pair who would speak for the couple decided to ask the chief for his horse, to go into town to ‘do it right’. And so we have done it since. When the time comes for getting the paper work done, they borrow the ‘chief’s horse’ to do it. The irreverence comes from being annoyed at having to ‘do it right’ as the government said. It was our defiance. Now it is simply to remember. That way we appreciate our own ways more, to remember we nearly lost them. And these youngsters get a kick out of being able to sass their elders for once,” he chuckled to the baby, making the girl giggle.

Someone ran up yelling “They’re back!”

The Chief handed the baby to her mother and stood. “Well, time for the powwow!”

The new couple was greeted with a great deal of well-wishing and congratulations as they were guided over to where the food had been set up. Nea handed the keys back to the Chief who tossed them to Johnny Southbend who asked if they had filled it up before they left town. The Chief, not owning a car himself, usually borrowed for the occasion.

Meme was understandably in a much brighter mood, and not even her mother could dampen her spirits. People gave them presents throughout the day, some of them handing them to the couple, others informing them where they had been placed. ‘I put you a caribou haunch in the back freezer;’ and ‘I made sure you’ve got extra sheets in the linen closet. The ones with the embroidery are from me. The patterned ones are from Sesqui.’

His uncle Johnny gave them the biggest present, however.

“Well,” he began when it was his turn. “No blood of mine starts off in life without a horse of his own.” That was when his new son led over a pale cream coloured pinto. The horse towered over the seven year old boy who grinned as he held up the reins. The animal’s hide had been painted with what looked to be the child’s hand prints on his neck and haunches. Tuwe picked the boy up and hugged him as Meme took the reins. The boy giggled as he was spun, then set on the horse’s back. They led the horse to the new house, where a horse shed stood in the back with a small paddock.

“You can winter him in my stable with the others if you want,” Johnny said. But then, nearly everyone wintered their horses in his stable. He had the only one on the reservation, though everyone took care of their own animals. He spotted

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Nea and waved her over. She had Thomas in tow, who was nibbling on Amikgidagaa's blueberry tartlets. "I have a present for you as well, Nea," he said, and began leading her towards his place.

"What? Why?" she asked.

Thomas slipped his arm around her waist and followed.

Johnny shrugged. "Cause it belongs to you, that's why. Call it a Christmas/birthday present, but I gotta give it now."

She frowned, not sure where this was leading. When she realized they were headed for the big barn, she guessed, "Why are you giving *me* a horse?"

He grinned. "Because it's yours. And you don't have one. Can't have a vet without a good horse. So call it an early graduation present."

"That is years away," she protested as he lead them over to an end stall.

"Yeah, well, it'll be years before you can ride him," he said, opening the door.

She looked inside. There was a gangly colt nursing a splashy paint mare, his little black tail swishing away. What she could see of him was white with a black patch on his rump. He was either Tovero or Tobiano. Johnny gave a short whistle and the colt pulled his head out from under his mother. Nea gasped. The chest bore a black shield and his head had a cap that covered both ears and little else except for what might have been a black star where the hair swirled. His pattern was different from the dream horse, but he was a medicine hat nonetheless. His eyes were a white blue. He looked up at his mother as Nea stepped into the stall.

Mamma?

The mare looked Nea over. *The Speaker,* she said, remembering. Nea nodded. *You have not come for a long time.*

I have been away. Learning to heal you.

Thomas listened to the soft whickering Nea made, watched the minute gestures of her body in wonder.

My son is beautiful, yes?

 she asked. *They make much fuss over his marks.*

Nea smiled. *He is beautiful, yes. Strong medicine his marks: the war bonnet and shield. He will be a great stallion. They wish him to be my stallion.*

I can live with that. You will be good to him.

I will.

The mare nudged the colt in her direction, bade him greet her properly.

Nea bent her head down as the colt hesitantly crossed to her, touched noses. The colt decided he liked the smell of her and nuzzled her neck. Nea stroked his, feeling the muscles in his neck and shoulders. "I think I shall name you Makadenang, the dark star, for your marking here," she said, touching the star on

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his forehead. *Makadenang, do you like it?*

It is good, said his mother.

It is long, said the colt.

Maka, then?

Maka good. Can I eat now?

Nea laughed, gave his sides a pat. *Yes. Go, grow big and strong and do not forget me. I will see you again someday. Do what that man asks,* she said, pointing to Johnny. *He will take care of you for me and teach you the things I need you to learn.*

The colt said nothing and reached for a teat, but his mother moved, blocked him. *Answer her, Maka. What do you say?*

The colt sullenly looked over his shoulder first at Johnny and then at her. *The apple man? Yes. I will. Can I eat now?*

Nea dropped her head for a yes and turned from the stall. “I don’t think you’ll have a lot of trouble training him,” she grinned, “Apple-man.”

“Apple-man?” he frowned.

“That’s what he calls you.”

Johnny smelled his hands. There was a faint scent of apples on them. He shrugged. “Makadenang, eh? Good name. You like him? See why he is yours?”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

Thomas felt a little embarrassed to ask, “Um, I don’t?”

She hugged him as she slipped her arm around him. “It has to do with a dream I had, about a black medicine hat. But my dream horse,” she said pointedly as they left the barn, “had one blue eye and one brown.”

“Huh. So because you dreamed of one you get one?”

Johnny laughed. “Not hardly. But she is tribal responsibility, which makes her as much mine as anyone else’s. I can give her a horse if I want. Besides...,” he added, “It is what Horse wanted. And when the spirits say, you find a way.”

“Can everyone here speak with spirits?” Thomas asked.

Nea gave him a squeeze. “I can’t. I only hear them through Gaganan. But we hear their wishes through the signs they leave and the dreams they send. You, I’m afraid, will have to rely on the signs they leave and learn to interpret them.”

The sounds of the powwow in full swing reached them as the rounded the buffer of the house. It seemed to have grown since that morning. “Why is that?” Thomas asked. “Why are you so sure I will never hear the voices of the spirits?”

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She looked deep into his eyes for a long moment. “Because... no one has told you,” she realized suddenly. She sighed. “The spirits can’t touch you. Do you remember what Hecuba said about your aura being mundane? Being insensitive?”

“Yeah,” he said sullenly, uncomfortable.

“Well, that is part of it, I think. The night I spoke with the raven, he ran an experiment. He asked a spirit to touch you. But he could not. It was as if you were not there. When the spirit moved to touch me... he couldn’t, not while I was with you. For some reason known only to the Great Spirit, you are untouchable.”

“I’m not sure that’s a comfort.”

She laid her head on his shoulder as they headed back towards the festivities. “All gifts can be viewed by two lights, good and bad. Even mine.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:

Blame It On The Moon

Come twilight, the four friends were sitting under an apple tree with Tuwe and Meme and some of the other young people talking about school and dating and life in general as it compared on the reservation and far from it. Everyone was learning something, sharing experiences, showing off. Meme had made Lulabelle as light as a feather and was gently blowing her back to her owner. Nea was laughing at the ferret's response. *Hey, what! AHHH!!! OOoooo! Heehee FUN! Wheee! Ohp! No, not the cat!!* she shrieked as Gaganan decided she made a better toy this way and began batting her along like a balloon low on helium.

Meme's eyes danced as she touched the ferret's nose, "Nitaawigi!" she said. Suddenly Lulabelle dropped to the grass and began to grow in size.

What? I... Oh! Heheheh, she chattered, narrowing her eyes at Gaganan, now easily his size.

Oh frog-guts, he gulped, frozen mid-stalk.

Suddenly the pair of them tore off across the grounds, chasing each other in good spirits. Nea could hear the occasional *Hey, watch it, lunatic!!* and *Wahooooo!* from the ferret over the group's laughter.

Julia was in tears she was laughing so hard. "Just tell me she won't stay that big," she choked.

Meme shook her head, "Never lasts more than an hour."

"Oh, good. I'd hate to have to feed her at that size!" The remark brought a renewed round of laughter.

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“Giving away our secrets, little Butterfly?” came an acid voice.

The group fell silent instantly, turned to look up at Daki’inde standing with a sour look and her fists on her hips.

“They know the rules, aunt,” Nea said quietly in Ojibwe. She felt Thomas stiffen beside her.

“Doesn’t matter. Accidents happen, trusts are broken, and love is lost, enemies made of friends,” she snapped.

“Not even when they are wonder workers themselves?” Nea growled.

Her aunt made a rude noise. *“White magic! Careless and dangerous. Childish dabbings in things they cannot begin to understand. Children playing with firecrackers in the barn!”* She pointed at Meme. *“You should not be showing these things to those not of us!”*

“Not even those who seek to protect one of our own?” she countered. Tuwe kept her from saying more with a gentle pressure on her shoulder.

“Not even!” she snarled. She turned on Nea, pointing a bony finger her way. *“And you. You who brought them here! Should have known better! Should have known you, of all people, would turn to one not of us! Here you are parading your white friends before your family and tribe. Dressing them like us does not make them like us. Does not make them understand!”* she fumed. *“And then there is this... nothing you bring home,”* she snapped, staring down her nose at Thomas. *“This boy even the spirits do not acknowledge! A filthy Iroquois would have been preferable to this... this white nothing!”*

“Did you stop to think maybe nothing is something?” Nea growled, beginning to lose her temper. She stood and faced her aunt down. *“Maybe there is a reason the spirits cannot touch him or me while I am with him?”*

No one else said a word, watching the exchange in mute horror.

“Yes! To separate you from your protection, to separate you from us and your culture. See? Already you lose respect for your elders,” she croaked in triumph.

“Maybe because I see nothing in you to respect. Have you thought of that, old hag?” They were inches apart. *“All I see in you is a scared old bat who ran from her own visions and killed my happy family cause she couldn’t have it for her own! You gave up your right to bully me like you did my mother. You can’t tell me who I can associate with, much less keep to my heart!”* she raged.

The old woman went white. *“You will not marry a white man so long as I breathe!”* she seethed.

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Nea was livid. “*So hold your breath!*” With that Nea turned so suddenly her braids struck the old woman in the face as she ran into the woods.

Daki’inde stood there a moment more, shocked that she had lost control in front strangers, shocked that her niece had dared to speak to her thus, shocked to see understanding in the boy’s eyes. She pointed at him and chanted.

Thomas gazed in horror at the finger aimed at his chest, listened to the words he was not sure were calling for his heart to freeze or to turn cold against Nea. All he knew for certain was that nothing happened. Not even a cold twinge. Meme surged forth to try and stop her, but Tuwe restrained her, calmly regarding Thomas with a puzzled look. Others gasped at Daki’s daring and cold malice, surprised that the white man did not fall over dead on the spot. If the woman was equally surprised, she did not show it, merely grunted and stormed off.

Only when she was out of sight did Hecuba find her voice. “Thomas, did you understand any of that?” He nodded numbly, staring where the old woman had gone. “What did it mean?”

“Nothing good,” he answered. He got up and went after Nea, hoping he would be able to find her in the growing dark.

Behind him he heard Meme call out to him. “She’ll head for the lake! Find a path and follow it east!”

Julia looked at the others. “What just happened?”

Subdued, they explained.



Finding Nea was easier than he thought. He found a pair of underwear on the ground, followed a few feet away by a bra and a trail of broken bracken even a blind man could follow. He ended up on the edge of a lake, smaller than the one at the university, standing fourteen feet from an elk cow drinking from the water. He hesitated. Finding a lone female elk, especially this time of year, was not exactly normal. There would be other cows or a bull nearby, and that could be bad. “Nea?” he asked softly.

The cow lifted her head, looked over her shoulder at him... and charged. Thomas took a sidestep back, found his back up against a tree with nowhere to go. He closed his eyes. The impact was forceful, but not crushing, and very human arms wrapped around him, a human head pressed against his shoulder weeping. He

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returned the embrace, relaxing with relief, both that he had found her and that he had not been trampled by an elk. He held her until she had cried herself out, leaning against the tree, stroking her back.

Finally she heaved a last sob and pulled away, went to the water's edge to splash her face. He followed her, sat down on the mossy bank beside her. Refreshed, she dried her face on her sleeve and curled one leg beneath her, wrapping her arms around the other one. "I am so sorry about all that."

He shrugged. "You said to expect it. She's very bitter."

"You have no idea," she said with a roll of her eyes. "So how did you find me?"

He meekly held up her underthings. "You... um... lost these..." he blushed.

She laughed, took them from him, held them up. They had apparently been ripped off her body in the change. "Well these are useless," she said and tossed them onto the bank next to her. "I have a problem with non-animal materials," she explained.

"That makes a weird kind of sense," he chuckled. The reminder of what she wasn't wearing under her leathers was arousing him. He tried to keep himself under control. He focused on the pale quarter moon rising over the trees on the far side of the sheltered lake. The gloaming light was nearly all gone by now. "Will we be able to find our way back to the village?"

She gave a short laugh. "If I want to, I can see in the dark, remember?"

"Yeah, right," he chuckled. This was an awkward moment getting more so by the minute.

"But I don't want to go back just yet."

"You were pretty hard on her though," he observed.

She looked up at him. "Just how much of that did you understand?"

He sighed. "Enough to know Hecuba is not going to get her chance to speak with her about potions. There were a few things that were said too fast, but I got the gist."

She leaned against him, he put his arm around her, placed a kiss on her head. "She deserved it. I said nothing that wasn't true. I have reason to believe she wanted my father for her own. A long time ago he could have taken both to wife if he wanted, though I don't know if he would have. But white man's law forbids it, and she hates him for that as well. I think she hates me because I should have been hers, I represent everything her sister had that she could not. But that was no reason to say the things she did. I've always shown her respect in her presence but she crossed the line tonight."

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“Why did she call me a nothing?” he asked softly. Nea looked up at him. “That is what she called me, isn’t it?”

Nea nodded.

He gave an embarrassed chuckle. “I somehow didn’t think she was calling me a ‘chop’, but I wasn’t completely sure. What did she mean?”

Nea sighed, fidgeted. “She called you that because the spirits cannot touch you. And because if you don’t know what you are looking for, you cannot see your soul. Everything has a soul, even trees, animals. Yours, I have been told, is almost ultraviolet or infrared, pale like that. It is there and strong. I can feel it,” she said, turning in his arms and placing her hand on his chest. “Here. When I touch you. When I’m near you. Your spirit envelopes me like a fur, safe and warm. But *she* cannot see it. The spirits tell her they cannot touch you or it, so she calls you a nothing, for only nothings have no soul. It is a foul insult.”

Thomas was filled with conflicting emotions. Her nearness and tender words filled him with a warmth and... something else. But what her aunt had said still ate away at the edges of him. He turned away from the emotions for a moment, concentrated upon the words. “When you told us about... *Him*... back at school, you said she had followed a vision quest to Him.”

“Yes,” she looked up at him, wondering where he was going with this.

“Well, usually vision quests do not lead one to their death do they?”

“No.”

“Then He must have had a gift for her, or something to show her.”

She frowned. “It is possible.”

He continued. “Perhaps, when she refused it, He gave it to someone else.” Her eyes glittered in the dim light as her mind raced. The moonlight touched the left side of her head, reflected off a single lock of her hair. He touched the strand, traced it with his fingers. “And *that* may be why she resents you so much.”

She gazed deep into his eyes, saw the vision horse’s mismatched ones blend into his double ringed orbs. Something was welling up inside her, like a geyser trying to force its way skyward, something that began deep and ran deeper. When she spoke her voice was breathy, thick with desire. “I don’t want you to think... that I would ever... marry someone just to spite that old badger.”

“Of course not,” he said. “But why bri...”

She kissed him.

What little control he had managed to gain over his body slipped away. He took her in his arms, returning the kiss, pulling her against him as if he could not breathe without her. At the moment he did not think he could. He kissed her face, her

temples, her throat, that fragrant hollow behind her ears. She raked her fingers through his dark, loose curls, pressed her body tightly against his, desperate to fit. The scent of him in the buckskin shirt was intoxicating, like catnip in feline form. She was half afraid she would shift on him, trying to get the most of that fragrance.

They were laying back on the mossy bank, lips locked, his body fit to bursting, his hand on her bare thigh where her dress had ridden up, her hands finding their way beneath his shirt when he had a brief moment of lucidity. Groaning, he pulled away, untangling himself. “No,” he moaned. “Can’t.”

She looked up at him, propped herself up on her elbows. “What? Why?” she breathed.

“Because, if I don’t stop now, I won’t be able to. And... I don’t want to screw this up.”

She sat there, panting, desperate for the feel of his hands on her body. She could only imagine how he must be feeling. She had certainly felt the strength of his desire against her. She fought against a hysterical laugh, knowing it would be highly inappropriate. He was trying to be chivalrous. She stood.

Thomas didn’t look up. He couldn’t bear her expression whatever it was, anger or relief, both would have crushed him. Then he heard the sound of leather hitting the ground. He turned, saw her dress lying in a heap and slowly followed the bare leg up her body to her face. Her braid wraps followed her dress to the earth. She knelt in front of him, took his hand in hers, placed it over her heart. “I want this, Thomas. Not to spite my aunt. For me. To complete *me*. My tribe holds no great store by virginity. Not so long as there is love. And no man in my life has moved me as you have. Nor cared as much. Don’t leave me wanting.”

“You... you are sure?”

“Yes.”

“Sure *He* won’t mind?” he added, with a jerk of his head up the peak.

She laughed. “He would have stopped us by now. If He even can.” She drew closer, inching for a kiss. “And I think... so long as I am with you... He can’t even touch me.” Their lips touched, sending a renewed electric jolt through their bodies. Thomas made up his mind. Once more he drew back, stood. She looked up at him, feeling hurt and left wanting, unable to believe he was still willing to stop when she noticed he was pulling off his shirt and spreading it on the moss. He took her dress and laid it out beside it. He then picked her up and laid her down on the leathers, picking up where they had left off.

She shivered as his hands wandered down the length of her body. “Cold?” he asked.

The Speaker

“No,” she smiled.

“You sure you want to do this here?” he whispered.

“Can’t think of a better place. Can you?” she purred, nibbling at whatever she could reach.

“Well, there are more conventional locations,” he answered, closing his eyes against the sensations she was causing.

“Oh, and we are such the conventional couple,” she smirked, tried to pull him down to her.

Again he resisted. He gave her a determined look. “Are you in a hurry?” he teased.

“Well... no. But... I don’t know. I’ve never... felt like this before,” she groaned.

“Neither have I,” he smiled. “I don’t know about you, but I kind of want to savour this,” he said, running his fingers lightly up the inside of her leg. “Find out what makes you quiver... like that,” he grinned, lingering over the area that had caused the reaction.

Permission gave him confidence. Assured that he would not be turned away, he was able to take his time, to look upon her without embarrassment, without feeling like he should not. They explored each other, taking their time, discovering themselves as well as each other. Not long into things, Nea heard a snuffling noise approaching through the woods. Whatever it was suddenly stopped. *What, what is it?* she heard from the bushes.

Gotta go around. There were two of them.

Why, what... Oh! People! the other voice squeaked. *What are we going to do? We’re upwind! Surely they smell us!*

A snort. *Humans can’t smell. They’ll only smell ya if ya pee on ‘em. Come on.* There was a shuffling eastward. *Be quiet, you know how dangerous rutting humans can be if you interrupt them!*

Nea failed to stifle her giggles. Thomas looked down at her. “Am I tickling you?” he asked, only mildly annoyed.

“No,” she said, wrapping her ankles around his to keep him from going anywhere.

“Then what’s so funny?”

“Don’t worry about it,” she giggled, sliding her hand over his thigh and giving him something else to think about.



The Speaker

The moon was high over the lake when they finally lay, near exhausted, on the bank. They rolled apart, lay there staring up at the sky, breathing heavy and feeling the languor seeping in. “Whoa,” he finally managed. “That was...”

She turned her head, cheeks flushed, eyes still fully dilated. “Magical?”

He laughed, rolled on his side, brushing a loose tendril of hair from her brow. “Yeah. Something about the earth moving?”

“There is a great deal of power in a first time. First anything,” she sighed.

“Did you...” he began, propping his head up on his hand. He couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence.

She just laughed, sat up and began to finish unbraiding her hair. “If you couldn’t tell...”

He sat up, began to work the strands loose for her. “I could tell... it’s just... well, I’ve heard things like that can be faked...” He thought about what he had just went through, what he had felt her body do to him and shook his head. “No, not like that. I guess I’m more worried you might... have...”

“Regrets?” she asked, turning to face him. He nodded. “No, I will have no regrets,” she smiled, kissed his nose. She stood, waved her arm towards the village. “And if you are worried what they will say? You can tell them I forced you! That I pinned you to the tree with my antlers and had my way with you!” she laughed, turning in the mild evening air. She stepped towards the water’s edge, glanced back at him over her shoulder.

He watched her. It was different from the night he had first glimpsed that body across the bright lake. She was closer and looking was permitted. She was like a goddess, a bronzed angel with a fall of raven hair hinting at the glories it brushed over, never quite hid. A single lock glinted in the moonlight. She was built solidly, neither rail thin nor overly plump. Her hips and thighs were ample but firm, the skin like silk. Her breasts were about average, nothing spectacular. In all, a very Monroe body type. But somehow she managed to be irresistible. Watching her stepping languidly into the lake new stirrings began within him.

He groaned, rolled over, pressing his forehead to the ground. “That’s *it*, woman!” he snarled. She looked up, startled, already in up to her luscious hips. “You are a drug! You’ve spiked my air and resistance is futile! I confess, I’m an addict.”

She laughed at him, cupped her hand and sent an arch of cold water over him. “Get in here and cool off,” she growled playfully.

The Speaker

He jumped up, raced after her. She dove in with a squeal, streaking deeper into the lake. He was a very strong swimmer and managed to catch her, pulling her in for a very wet kiss. She clung to him, wrapping her legs around his hips as he stood on the rocky bottom, chest-deep. "At this rate we'll never get any sleep," she grinned.

"At this temperature, I don't see that being a problem," he chattered. "Damn its cold!"

She laughed, slipping out of his grip and swimming around him. "What do you expect? It's snow fed this time of year."

"You could have warned me! Get back over here and keep me warm, woman!"

She shook her head. "Nope. I'm fine right here."

He sighed, let his feet off the bottom and just floated. He was starting to get used to the temperature and the reflection of the moon and stars on the water was calming. He admired the way the light glistened off the streak in her hair. He felt something brush his leg. "Umm, what is in here?"

She chuckled. "Scared?"

"A little!" he exclaimed. "I'm a bit ...exposed... you know."

"Relax. Wrong time of year for man-eating snakes. In the water anyway. Just a few fish, maybe some otters, but I think they are on the other side somewhere, up the tributary," she answered pointing to a portion of the lake he could not see.

"There's a river that way?" She nodded.

"Hmm. I wonder. Can you do fish?"

"Uh... I don't think so. Might be able to pull off an otter though," she said, thinking about it.

"Wanna try? You *are* supposed to be practising, you know. Don't want Raven to start keeping you up nights again," he warned.

She splashed him. "No, that's your job now!"

He splashed her back, but she was gone. In her place was a large, sleek furred otter bobbing along on her back. She swam around him, rolling to show off, keeping her head above the water. "Sweet!" he laughed.

She slipped under the water, diving to see what it was like and got a nose full of water. She came up sputtering. She curled up over his shoulders and around his neck snorting and rubbing her nose with her paws. She sneezed several times and slowly melted back into a woman again, her arms draped around his neck as she clung to his back, trying to clear her sinuses. "Apparently... there's a trick to that..." she coughed.

The Speaker

He chuckled, but held onto her. “You ok?” He turned when she nodded, pulling her into his arms. “Maybe you should get a teacher? Doesn’t that kid... what’s his name... Bobby Whitefeather? Have an otter for his *nijji*?”

She shook her head. “Bobby *Whitemantle* and yes, he does. I’ll ask Selkie tomorrow.”

He laughed. “He named it *Selkie*?”

She shrugged. “He’s half Irish, what can I say?” She cleared her throat. “Excuse me, but... is that a pike in the water or are you getting used to the temperature?”

He gave a deep-throated chuckle, grabbing a tighter hold on her and placing kisses on her collar bone. “You just might have created a monster.”

“No,” she sighed, pressing her cheek against his temple. “Just woke it up.”



It was in the grey hours of the morning when Thomas carried a small grey cat up to the new house on the edge of the village. He knocked on the door at the cat’s urging, looking around to make sure no one saw them. He was a nervous wreck, suddenly feeling very self-conscious about the night before. He nearly jumped out of his skin when the door swung violently open. Meme stood there, hair ruffled, wrapped in a buffalo-skin robe and looking like an angry bear just roused from hibernation. Her expression changed the moment she realized who it was.

“Everything all right?” she asked, worried.

“Um... here,” he said, passing her the cat. “She’ll explain,” he added, and made himself scarce.

Meme looked down at the purring bundle in her arms, frowned. “Nea?” she asked. The cat just blinked at her. She sighed, closed the door and set the cat down. “Why the 007?” she demanded, folding her arms over her chest.

As a cat, Nea was fully aware why Meme was a little miffed, though hearing the faint snoring from the other room she judged they had come in at the end of things. She shifted form and spread her arms, displaying the bloodstain on her leather dress.

Meme’s expression changed yet again. Her eyes grew wide and her mouth dropped open. “Oh, honey!” she exclaimed and suddenly threw her arms around Nea in a hug. “It’s so about time!”

Nea gave an embarrassed laugh. “Didn’t think it was *that* big a deal,” she said as Meme started to lead her off to the kitchen.

The Speaker

Meme paused, fixed her with a stern look. "If you didn't think it was a big deal, he didn't do it right," she growled. "Tell me he did it right..." she added with a look that told Nea she might very well work some vengeful magic if he hadn't.

"Oh, no. That's not what I meant. It was... more than right," she said quickly. "I meant, that I hadn't yet."

"Oh." Meme stared at her another moment, as if trying to judge if she were telling the truth, then dismissed the whole thing. "Well, let's get that somewhere safe, shall we?"

Nea breathed a sigh of relief. When they got into the kitchen she slithered out of the dress and laid it on the table where Meme pointed. "I just didn't want to parade through camp with that in plain sight. Not everyone's business you know."

Meme chuckled, putting a kettle on the stove before rummaging through a box of skins for the right scrap. "I know what you mean. So... how was he?" she grinned.

"Which time?" Nea asked, propping her chin on her fist.

"Oooo, aren't we the lucky one," she smirked, spreading a small square of buttery leather next to the stained dress. "Where? We were kind of wondering if you two were all right, but Gaganan wasn't worried so neither were we."

"Moss bank. Used the dress for ground-cover," she explained.

"Nice of him," she mumbled. From her tone, Nea gathered that Tuwe had not had as much wit.

She watched as Meme set one finger on the dress and one on the square, began to draw concentric circles around the stain at the same time she mirrored the motion on the other piece of leather. Slowly she began to spiral inward. Nea watched the blood stain fade from her dress, appearing in the centre of the leather square. When she was done, Meme handed Nea her dress back.

"I'll make the pouch today," Meme said.

"No hurry," Nea answered from within the depths of the dress as she pulled it over head.

"You know," said Tuwe yawning as he came into the kitchen and took the now whistling kettle off the stove. "We probably ought to make the man a medicine bag while we're at it."

Nea pulled her hair out from under her garment and chuckled. "Why, what good would it do? The man is his own protection. He'd just cancel it out."

Tuwe shrugged, measuring tea from a canister into a pot on the counter. "Principle. Appearance. A sense of belonging. A lot of reasons, magic aside."

The Speaker

Nea propped her chin on her fist again, leaned on the table. “That makes a weird kind of sense.”

“It makes Tuwe Sense,” Meme smirked. “Which is to say without any logic to back it up. Out of the way, Dream-boy, if you want to eat,” she growled, swatting his rump.

Tuwe grabbed the teapot and set it on the table, busied himself getting three cups and the honey while it steeped.



By the time breakfast was done the sun was fully up and Nea headed back towards the chief’s house. Halfway there she took a detour, following the sounds of laughing and splashing in a small pond. Ducks scattered out of the way of several children who were burning off their breakfasts playing with a large otter. She was greeted by them when she was seen, and swarmed when she sat down on the edge of the pond, slipping her mocs off and dangled her feet in the water.

“You coming to play?” one of them asked.

“Actually I’m here to learn how to swim.”

A girl laughed. “Nea, you *know* how to swim. You taught me!”

Nea gave her a tickle. “Not that way. I have to learn again.” Suddenly she spotted someone she didn’t know. “And who might you be? Ah, you must be Tamai, Uncle Johnny’s foster son.”

He nodded shyly.

“Are missing your family yet or are you having too much fun?”

He shrugged. “A little of both.”

“Say!” Nea had an idea. “Uncle Johnny told me you once made your dogs blue. That true?”

He giggled, nodded. “I like blue. Wanted a blue ox, but we don’t have one.”

Nea separated out her silver lock. “Think you can make this black?”

“It is black,” one of the boys said.

“No, it is silver, but it is dyed that way and it won’t last. In the moonlight you can still see it.”

He reached out and ran the strands through his fingers. “I’ll try.” He ran it through his hands like he was milking a cow then finally shook his head. “It’s resisting.”

“How kin ye tell?” asked a ten year old boy with a faint lilt to his accent.

The Speaker

Tamai shrugged. "It feels different, and I can see true colours, no matter how you hide them. Like that white wonder worker Tuwe calls Raven, the one you brought?" he pointed to Nea.

She nodded, "Hecuba?"

"Yeah. Her hair's really kinda brown."

Nea laughed. "Maybe you should ask her if she wants you to make it always black," she said, tickling him.

He giggled, pulled out of reach. "It won't stay. Never does. But the older I get the longer it lasts," he added proudly.

"Then you keep practising Now, Bobby," she said, turning to the boy with the lilt. "Where's Selkie?"



About ten o'clock, Hecuba and Julia headed out to find Nea. They had slept late, as most people had, having stayed up 'til all hours enjoying the powwow and the talking by fires. They went to the chief's house where Seven Trees opened the door.

"Is Nea up yet?" Julia asked, giggling as Lulabelle wiggled around in her shirt trying to get a better sniff of the interior of the house.

"Nea did not come home last night," she told them, offering her fingers to the ferret who sniffed, then grabbed them and began licking them happily. "We assumed she bedded down where ever the young people were."

Hecuba shook her head. "Her aunt interrupted. Said some pretty mean things we did not understand. Nea yelled back then ran off into the woods." Hecuba's eyes narrowed. "Then her aunt pointed at Thomas and said something that sounded an awful lot like a curse then left. Thomas went after Nea and we haven't seen them since."

The chief peered over Seven Trees' head, elbowing the door open wider with a look of concern on his face. His hands were covered in something greasy that was driving the ferret wild with begging. "Did you ask the others what she said?"

Hecuba shook her head. "They didn't exactly translate, but they were talking for hours about how Thomas should have died on the spot. I saw the magic, could not read its intent clearly, but I think I agree with them."

He sighed. Seven Trees looked up at him. "This is serious, old man."

The Speaker

He nodded. “Come in, girls. I need to know things. You will forgive me?” he asked, indicating his hands, “but I am in the beginning of making pemmican.”

He led them into the kitchen where he was cutting meat into strips for the drying rack. Seven Trees offered them tea. “Now,” said Falling Elk. “Tell me what these young people said last night, and who you were talking to.”



They left the chief’s house with a slice a piece of earlier batches, happy with their brunch.

“We still aren’t any closer to finding Nea or what happened last night,” grumbled Julia.

Hecuba’s sharp eyes spotted an occupied hammock outside the house of Tuwe’s mother. “So, we find someone who was there. We go to the source,” she said, wrapping and pocketing the rest of her slice and strode up to the hammock.

Thomas opened his eyes when someone cleared their throat to see Hecuba and Julia standing over him with their arms crossed. “Huh? Oh,” he groaned, shifting and closing his eyes. “What do you two want?”

“What did you do with Nea?” Hecuba asked sternly. She was having fun with this.

“I didn’t do anything to Nea,” he protested.

Hecuba looked knowingly at Julia, suspicions confirmed. “Notice he said ‘to’ whereas I said ‘with’. Suspicious? I think so.”

Julia, not quite certain what was going on, nodded sagely.

Thomas opened one eye, “What do you two want? I’m trying to sleep.”

“We can’t find Nea, and since you were the last person to see her...” Hecuba said, left her sentence trailing meaningfully.

“No, I wasn’t,” he groaned, rolling over. “I gave her to Meme this morning.”

“We saw her and Tuwe on her fosters’ porch an hour ago with the in-laws. No Nea,” Julia said, narrowing her eyes at him and giving him a mean look. “Try again.”

“Then go ask her Nijiji! She’s probably hiding in a corner somewhere trying to sleep like I am,” he growled over his shoulder. “Just... look for an extra cat somewhere. If it’s grey it’s probably her. Now if you don’t mind I’d like a least another hour of sleep before I can be civil.”

With a knowing look at Julia, they walked off, headed where they last saw Meme. “Suspicions confirmed.”

The Speaker

“What suspicions?” Julia asked.

“Think about it, Julia,” Hecuba sighed as they walked, began ticking things off on her fingers. “Nea ran off in tears. Thomas followed into the woods. Meme said something about a lake. You put it together. A quiet lake, moonlight, Thomas holding her to comfort her... they don’t show up back in camp ‘til dawn and all they want to do is sleep.”

Julia frowned. “They fell asleep in the woods. So?” she shrugged.

Hecuba stopped, not sure if she was going to laugh or cry at the girl’s naivete. “Ok, put yourself and William in that picture. You’ve been crying. He’s holding you close... what’s the most romantic thing he could do?”

Julia racked her brain. “Kiss her tears away?”

“And then...”

Julia ran the scene through her mind, finally came to the obvious conclusion. “Naw! You think they...” Her eyes were wide.

Hecuba laughed. “Why do you think she’s hiding? They were up all night.” She pointed off to the left. “Come on, I think I see Meme.”

The pair trotted off in that direction.

Behind them, Daki’inde stood frozen, her face a scowl of hatred. She stalked off, pausing near another group of young people who were talking about last night. Some who had been there for the argument were telling some who had not been. She listened.

“Are you sure he’s still alive? A curse like that...” they were asking, trying to see the hammock where Thomas was sleeping.

“Oh, I’m sure,” they were answered. “I just saw him move in the hammock. He was talking to her school friends, the roommate. He is very much alive. And, I’m guessing, his heart hasn’t ‘gone cold’ to her either, not if they slinked back into camp after dawn,” they laughed.

“You think she did? With him?”

One of the girls slapped the speaker on the back of the head. “Have you seen how they look at each other? It was only a matter of time. The only real question is was last night the first time or not. My guess is no.”

“I say it was,” said one boy. “You see the way he reacts to people when he’s with her? Like he’s afraid of what we’ll say, a white boy dating one of ours.”

“That proves he has, afraid we might find out and object. White man’s ways are different regarding sex. They are ashamed of it,” said the first girl. “Just ask Meme’s whitified mama.”

The Speaker

“I don’t know what she sees in him though. If the spirits cannot touch her when she’s near him... he’s got to feel like a vacuum,” said one of the boys. “I mean, I saw Daki’inde’s spell fail to reach him. It was like he had a shield in front of him. It just *ended* like four feet from him.”

The girl shook her head. “You weren’t sitting next to him. He’s warm, like ...a white buffalo robe. You just feel... safe near him.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re a girl.”

Another boy shook his head. “Nope. I was near him at the feast. I know what she means. It was like entering a lodge and dropping the flap. There was a sudden sense of peace and quiet even though there were kids running around whooping and hollering and everyone was talking.”

The group ooo’d and ahhh’d and continued discussing the event. Daki’ stormed away.



Thomas had finally drifted off to sleep. Dreams filled his head, visions of a certain bronze goddess half submerged in moonlit lake. Suddenly the world spun off its axis, tumbling him into the void. He woke with a start as he hit the ground. He looked around wildly, still not 100% certain of his surroundings. Nea’s aunt was standing on the other side of the hammock, hate and fury blazing in her eyes.

“You filthy, defiling little weasel,” she growled.

He suddenly understood. His temper flared as he stood up. “All right, grandmother, that’s *it!*” he exclaimed.

“I am no one’s grandmother!” she shrieked.

“Maybe that’s part of your problem!” he snapped, running both hands through his hair to get it out of his face.

She pointed her bony finger at him. “I know what you did to my niece. And now she hides herself in shame from her own people, unwilling to face them after you took advantage of her,” she snarled.

“Me?” he almost squeaked. “I’ll have you know...,” he stopped. “No. That is none of your business. You aren’t responsible for her. Nea is a grown woman, able to make her own decisions, even by tribal law. I have tried to be respectful, of you and your ways, but you make it impossible.”

“Don’t you talk to me of my ways, pup!” she shrieked. “I am an elder of this tribe and I know my ways better than some wanna-be white boy playing at cowboys

and Indians! Go find yourself a white den for your one-eyed snake and leave our women untainted!”

Before he could react she began chanting in Ojibwe again, half gibbered words, but he understood their meaning. He set his fists on the hide of the hammock, leaned forward until her pointed finger touched his chest. When he spoke, his voice was low, his words Ojibwe. *“Don’t try and curse me again, old one,”* his syntax was imperfect but his meaning was crystal clear. She stared in shock. *“I your spells are weak against. Have figured that out already. You lucky they not rebound to bite you instead, way white magic would. Silver not yours. You gave up right. Not your say if she desire me.”*

“No! I am her blood. She will listen if I speak loud enough!”

He gave an ironic laugh. *“She will listen all right. Me to share my wisdom, old one. And no,”* he added, pointing at her when she opened her mouth to sneer something, *“now your turn is listen. Louder you speak, farther she will run escape your words. She grown woman, able make own choices, own mistakes. You want her home? You have let her find own way back. You make live here unbearable and will never return. And then what will He do?”* he said, pointing up at the peak that rose above the trees of the village. *“Huh? What will He do if He wake in four years and she not here? In seven, in ten? If she never return and He learn what drive her away? What will He do? Who will He blame? His chosen? Or one who refused Him when He called?”*

She blanched.

He saw the sign of weakness, disbelief and pressed his advantage. *“Yes, I know what sleeps up there. I know why your hair all grey instead of streaked with silver. What worse... Silver know too. Now leave us alone!”* He turned and stalked away, not knowing or caring where he was going. He had taken a guess that she had once been marked with the streak of silver, that it had gone grey when she ran from her vision quest and Nea had been chosen, for what he still did not know. Her ashen expression told him he had been right.

He was brought up short by the chief, narrowly avoided ramming into him. He stopped, took a deep breath and lowered his head. “I am sorry, Chief. I... have shamed myself and one of your elders. I lost my temper. I should not have.”

The man held his silence for a long moment, looked Thomas over inside and out. He set his hand on his shoulder. “I am sorry to say this,” he began. Thomas’s gut froze, certain he was going to be sent away. “But you were justified.”

He looked up, shocked. “Sir?”

The Speaker

“It is she who has lost control. She has shamed us. You speak our tongue well enough. I think you know what she tried to do to you?”

“It was either to turn my heart against her niece, which I can understand, however wrong. Or she tried to turn my heart to ice literally. I am not sure which,” he said heavily.

“She tried to kill you. For that there will be justice, bad omen though it is at this time. There will be a council,” he said. “I will want you there, this evening, as darkness falls.”

Thomas nodded. This was not going to help the situation. “As you ask, Grandfather.”

The chief smiled sadly. “Now go, son. A walk in the woods will calm your soul.”



By the time Hecuba and Julia gave up looking for Nea, they found her. She was curled up on the porch swing of the chief’s house with Gaganan. He looked up as they approached and shook his head.

Hecuba paused, peered over the rail at the grey and white cat he was wrapped around. “She all right?” she whispered.

When he nodded, she gestured for Julia to come away, and the two of them headed over to the Southbend’s to see the horses.



Thomas followed what had to be a deer run northwest up into the mountain. It was isolated and quiet. Several squirrels raced away from him, hiding from hawks that occasionally streaked through the sky. Once, he even saw a pine martin sunning himself on a branch high over head. Once his head had cooled he began talking to himself, thinking out loud, hoping to talk his way out of the predicament he believed himself in. “Another fine mess you’ve gotten us into, Tommy old boy,” he began.

“I know that, but what are we going to do about it? I mean, the old bat *did* try to kill you, whether she was shooting blanks or not. Some places in Haiti consider even an attempt to voodoo someone to death as attempted murder. What will they do to her aunt if I agree with the charges? Can I even refuse to press charges? And

what would that get me if I do? It could leave me with a snake in the hen-yard, that's what. And if I press and they take her from the council, punish her yet leave her alive... she will go after Nea, or worse. If they kill her... would Nea forgive me for destroying her last blood tie to this world?" He growled, snatched up a stone and sent it skittering into the underbrush. "Damn it! I don't even know what this council will entail!" A rabbit, startled by his stone, streaked out of the brush across his path. "Sorry!" he called, suddenly remembering Nea's warnings.

"All right," he said, trying to calm himself. He took a few deep breaths, continued walking. He did not really see where he was going, just followed his feet blindly. "All that nastiness aside. She's a bitter old woman, but that does not mean she isn't right," he sighed. "These are very traditional people. Multi-tribal, but intensely traditional. They haven't objected to our presence or association with their daughter, but... they may not know what you two have been up to, either. May object to a serious relationship. Though I think Tuwe would have warned me if they would. Or Meme. Anang. They would have told me I shouldn't. Anang's Mainganoden. She would know. So that part's ok," he mused, skirting a rocky ridge, never seeing the fox and her kits as she tumbled them back into their den at the sight of him.

"First thing you should ask is what do you want. What would you do if you were to leave tomorrow and never see her again?" he asked. He stopped, staring out over an awesome valley vista without really seeing it. He felt a sudden pain in his chest, sat down on a boulder. "You'd stop breathing, that's what," he replied. "So let's assume you stay," he continued, began to feel the twinge subside. "Could you live here with her?" he asked himself, getting up and resuming his walk. "It is beautiful country. I don't see why not. But what about a job? The career you're spending all these years in school for? You're going to graduate a few years ahead of her. Well... I suppose I could get a grant to work here. I mean,... I'll have access to just about every tribe, have the chance to talk and hear their stories first hand. Better than studying them, I would live as one of them. Granted, I'd have to edit out certain things if I ever publish, but I could write a book here. Meanwhile... meanwhile we could live off the land. I could be a vet's assistant easy, help her get her practice off the ground. Find odd-jobs around campus to live until she graduates, stay near her."

He stopped at a brook and laughed. "Listen to yourself, Thomas. You've answered your own questions. Willing to move to be near her, to put your career on hold, not that your career will be all that high-paid, planning how you'll live. Your

only problem is will she accept? And how do you ask? It's not a matter of if you can. That Whitemantle boy is half Irish she said, and he's accepted enough they gave him a Niiiji Manidoo. But then... it is not really about what you want to do, but what you *should* isn't it?"

He bent to take a drink from the brook, splashed his face. When he opened his eyes, he saw a beaded moccasin on the rock not eight inches from his nose. He looked up, saw a withered old woman standing there, holding a gnarled old stick that was decorated with feathers and scraps of fur. Her eyes were a clouded white and her white braids were tied in a knot behind her to keep them from dragging the ground. She was staring straight down at him. He heard the creaking of a branch a few feet away and looked over her shoulder to see the giant raven settling down upon a branch that barely held his weight.

He stood, took a half step back, bowed his head. "*Grandmother*," he said respectfully in Ojibwe. He had never seen this woman before, but from her description and the presence of the bird he guessed this was the Memory: Spider Yellowbuck. He nodded to the bird as well. "*Zoongizi*," he said.

The raven cawed at him. The old woman cawed back, something that sounded half like a laugh.

Thomas held out his hand to the woman. "*May I help you across, Grandmother Yellowbuck?*" he asked.

She tipped her head, a faint grin on her face. "*Why not call me Grandmother Spider?*" she asked. "*That is my name and you know that too.*"

He blushed. "*I... I not wish offend the spirit,*" he offered weakly. "*It... sounded wrong.*"

She cackled, but he felt her dry, bony hand lock on his as she allowed him to pull her safely to shore. Her grip reminded him of a bird's claw, the same rough, knobbed texture and narrow strength.

"*Can I... help Grandmother?*" he asked, certain she had not appeared before him just so he could help her across the brook.

"*No. I am here to help you. The birds told me where you were. And a good thing, too.*"

He frowned, began looking around him, trying to puzzle out what she meant.

"*Listen.*"

He did.

"*What do you hear?*" she asked, sitting down on a fallen tree that was just the right height for her bony frame.

The Speaker

“*Nothing,*” he said at length. “*Only water.*”

“*And why is that a problem?*”

He groaned. “*I go too far. Forgive me. I not pay attention.*”

“*You know why you should not be here?*”

He nodded. “*I know story. Most anyway. Thank you.*”

She waved her hand dismissively at him. “*Not the only reason. Wanted to see you for myself,*” she said, her clouded eyes piercing him.

Thomas sank onto the grass at her feet, legs crossed. “*Can you help my problem, elder?*” he ventured.

She chuckled. “*Which one?*”

“*They related. Actually relations part of it,*” he said, scratching his head, pulling out a leaf that had gotten tangled in his hair. “*I fear to let them press charges against Sooneawa’s aunt because there be repercussions could hurt our relationship or her later if she revenge. But if do not... is nothing keep her from try again, or go after someone not me since she no able harm me. Which brings first question: should I even try keep her heart, even that is my whole reason for life, because only want best end? That and not sure what He will do,*” he said, tipping his head up the slope, “*if I do.*” He buried his hands in his hair, his elbows on his knees, groaning.

“*You have a lot of questions. You have yet to ask the right one.*”

He looked up at her. “*Please, Grandmother. What is right question?*”

She pointed her stick at him in triumph. “*Aha! You see? That is a right question. You’re getting warmer.*”

He thought a moment, was beginning to follow the spiderweb threads of her logic. “*How find answers to my questions?*”

She smiled, nodding. “*You ask. You pray. Just because the spirits cannot touch you does not mean they cannot reach you, that they cannot hear you. Just as I have had to learn to see with my ears, you must learn to hear with your eyes. Pray. It does not matter how or to whom or what. Pray to the Eastern Buddha if you will, he was a very wise man. The Great Spirit is in all things, is all gods. The world calls Him by what names they understand, see Him how they choose to. He answers how He knows you will hear. If you choose to live your life with us, as one of us, you must learn to hear His voice as we do, in all things. Whisper your questions to a leaf and set it free on the water,*” she said, pointing her stick to the brook. “*Write them on bark-strips and set them in the fire, letting the smoke carry your words to Him. Cast the ashes to the wind... however you choose is right. Only ask and watch. You will see your answers in the world around you if you know how to look.*” She tapped his

The Speaker

knee with her stick. *“Just remember your manners. Please and thank you go a long way.”* She got off the tree and walked towards the raven. *“Your Ojibwe is good. Keep practising”*

He rose, bowed. *“Thank you, elder. I will heed your advice.”* He started to walk off, straight down the gentle slope but her voice called him back.

“To the left, boy. There’s a way to your left. It will lead you to a moose track. Safer than straight down.”

Again, Thomas thanked her and turned left, aware she had never looked at him in giving her directions.

And longer, croaked the raven as Thomas disappeared into the woods.

The old woman shrugged. *Ah well, there is that too,* she grinned.



Thomas had walked for about ten minutes when he came to a sudden drop-off. It was not the same valley ridge he had come across before. This was more a gorge so steeply angled and shadowed the bottom could not be seen. Below in the darkness he could hear water, a river perhaps tumbling over rocks in its haste down the mountain. He imagined it had been carved by centuries or more of spring runoff from the peak. There was a trail that ran along its edge, led to a natural rock bridge but he imagined if he had continued the straight path down he had intended to take he would have run headlong into it without a way across.

He paused at the apex of the bridge, stared down into the pitch black of the cavern below him. It occurred to him that this place was as good as any to speak his prayers. This river ran downhill, past the village or at least past the lake where he and Nea had spent the night. Perhaps as his ‘words’ raced to the bottom ahead of him, his answers would be found along the way in their wake.

He crossed back to the first side, where he had seen a dogwood tree in full bloom and took a single blossom. He started to turn then thanked the tree before going back to the centre of the bridge and kneeling. He held the flower in cupped hands took a deep breath, feeling very silly and asked his questions whispering them to the petals. Very glad no one was around to see him even though he knew none of the natives would likely laugh or find this at all as ridiculous as he felt, he let the blossom go, casting it out over the chasm. The wind caught it, made it sail up and out before slowly drifting downward into the darkness. He sighed, stood up and crossed to the other side. As he made his way down the mountainside he paid more

The Speaker

attention to his surroundings and the direction in which he went. It had suddenly occurred to him just how lost he could get out here.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:

Drum Circle

Nea finally yawned, stretched arching her back and sat up. Gaganan opened one eye, looked at her and closed it again. *Feeling better?* he asked.

Yes, she yawned. *Though I feel like I could sleep the rest of the day and not think twice about it.*

He chuckled. *Oh yeah, she gets it,* he sighed rolling onto his back.

Nea eyed the expanse of white fur spread like a banner before her. Her eyes narrowed. She could never resist that white flag. She pounced, burying her face and paws in his belly. He was startled, flipped over instantly and stared at her with wide eyes. She just chuckled.

He narrowed his eyes lowering his body. Nea suddenly realized he was going to pounce and took off running. People dodged the pair of cats as they streaked through the camp like a pair of squirrels around a tree. After a bit, Nea tired of the game, tried to shift mid-run and ended up rolling in the grass where Gaganan pounced. She flopped over onto her back and he laid down on her chest tucking his paws under, unfazed by her heavy breathing. *Shouldn't have tried to cheat,* he smirked.

Like you wouldn't have if you could?

He licked his shoulder, ignoring the question. *But it tells me what we need to work on.* He got off her, stretched. *You might want to go find the girls. They were looking for you earlier. I think they went to the barn.* He wandered off without another word towards the nearest tree to sharpen his claws.

The Speaker

Nea laid there another few minutes before she got up, dusted herself off and headed towards the barn. The area was empty of people just a few of the horses milling in the corral. Maka and his mother were there; the colt taking his first few tentative steps away from his mother, testing how far he wanted to go. He saw Nea and bounced over whisking his little tail and bleating, *Mamma, it's the Speaker! You bring me something?*

 he asked, began nosing her as she stepped between the rails.

She stroked his forelock, laughing. *You are a little young for anything I could bring you. Maybe next time.*

Gaganan hopped up onto the post and sat regarding the rangy youngster. He sniffed and looked sedately away. *I am so glad they grow up fast.*

Nea was still playing with the colt when Hecuba and Julia rode up with Mitena's three granddaughters. "There y'all are!" Julia exclaimed. "Told ya she'd turn up after lunch."

Nea stomach grumbled as she thought about food. She had missed breakfast *and* lunch. Hecuba dismounted quickly, let one of the girls lead off the horses. Julia hopped down to join her. They were both in jeans and a t-shirt. Hecuba groaned, walked stiffly. Julia seemed a lot more comfortable.

"Not used to riding?" Nea asked with a smile leaning on the fence. The colt stuck his head through the rails, leaning up against her as if she were his mother, half hiding behind her.

Hecuba shook her head. Julia laughed. "It's been a while for me, but I won't be stiff for more than a few hours."

Hecuba growled, glaring at her, but crossed to the fence and held her hand out to the colt. "It was fun, don't get me wrong. But I think I'll be paying for it for the next week. Cute foal."

The colt sniffed her fingers and hid more fully behind Nea.

What's the matter, Maka?

 she whickered.

Smell like... don't know don't like,

 he shivered.

Gaganan purred as Julia stopped to pet him. *He smells the snake I expect. Just doesn't know what it is.*

"I don't think he likes me," Hecuba frowned.

"He smells Princess on you," she explained. "It's an instinctive fear. Where *is* Princess, by the way?"

"Newin found me a spare lamp. I set her up in his room in the small tank we brought, next to Goona," Hecuba smiled, hopping up onto the fence and turning

her mind from the colt, telling herself it didn't bother her. "Let me tell you, that is a nice snake. Almost twice Princess's size!"

"Hey, little fella," Julia crooned, trying to coax the colt to sniff her hand. He stuck his nose out timidly. "He's cute."

"Ah, I forgot. Meet Maka. Johnny gave him to me yesterday. Apparently they have decided they can't have a native vet without a native pony," Nea laughed and the colt butted his head against her and trotted off, back to his mother to eat.

"Cool!" Julia breathed.

Nea leaned back against the fence, tapped Hecuba's knee and pointed to the nursing colt. "*That* is a medicine hat."

"Really?" she asked, her eyes going wide. "Just like the dream?"

She wobbled her hand in the air. "Eh... same colours, same placement, the black war bonnet, chest shield and rump blanket, but the pattern's different. And well... his eyes. But significant enough."

"What are ya'll talking about?" Julia frowned.

Nea laughed and explained about the dream she'd had before leaving for school.

"Wow, that's... just creepy. So is she the snake or is Jonah?" Julia asked, jerking her thumb at Hecuba.

Hecuba laughed. "A little late now, don't you think? I made her ask the same question the day she told me about it. Besides, it's *obviously* Jonah."

Nea thought about it. Something occurred to her that had not occurred before. "Not necessarily."

They looked at her. "Who else?" they asked.

Nea leaned forward on the fence, staring at her hands, remembering the argument from the night before. "The horse and the snake were fighting over me. Last night... I fought with my aunt over him. It is only a matter of time before he steps in to stop her. He won't stand for much more of that, I can feel it." Her friends had gone silent. She looked up at them, saw deep concern on their faces, almost fear. "What? Did something happen while I was sleeping?" She felt panic rising within her.

"Well... yes," Julia whispered.

"And last night," Hecuba added. "After you ran off she tried to curse him."

"What!?"

Behind her, Maka and his mother both looked up. Maka timidly walked over, began nosing her. Gaganan, who had been investigating a hole by a fence post, was

suddenly all ears.

“Calm down. He’s obviously all right,” Hecuba said, getting off the fence and setting her hands on Nea’s shoulders. “She couldn’t touch him. I don’t know what she tried to do, but I know it was bad.”

“How bad?” Her voice was quivering, breathing was hard.

“Bad enough the chief started an investigation,” Julia said quietly. “He’s been asking all those people we were with last night. He found out when we came lookin’ fer you and questioned us, then started lookin’ for the others.”

“Why didn’t you come tell me?” Nea finally put her hand on the colt’s head to reassure him, to keep him from pushing at her.

“We couldn’t find you. When we did, Gaganan told us to let you sleep,” Hecuba said. “That’s when Buttercup and her sisters decided to take us horseback riding. To get our minds off what’s going to happen tonight.”

Nea felt dead inside. “What is going to happen tonight?”

“Trial,” said Julia.

“For just a curse? That didn’t even work?” she asked in disbelief. Her voice cracked. Their silence said there was more. “Tell me!”

They couldn’t. Gaganan walked up. *I heard what they said after you left last night, after I sent spirits to watch you. If he had not been who he is... this ‘nothing’ she called him... he would have died on the spot.*

Nea suddenly pulled herself over the rail, made ready to storm off to find her aunt. Gaganan cut her off, putting his paws on her hip, pushing her back. *She was out of her mind with rage.*

“That doesn’t excuse murder!” she snapped.

Hecuba jumped off the rail, followed closely by Julia as they grabbed Nea and held her, as much to comfort as restrain. “Attempted... but that’s not all.”

Nea looked at her, her voice was thick, her eyes dark. “What more could she do?”

“We heard about it as we came in from our ride,” Julia drawled. “She flipped him out of his hammock this morning and laid into him, tried it again.”

“Only he lashed back at her,” Hecuba injected. “In Ojibwe. They argued and he left her white as a ghost and either no one knows exactly what he told her or no one will say. The chief spoke to him right after that and he went for a walk. They’re going to hold a council tonight to decide what’s to be done. ...And we gotta be there.”

The Speaker

“Witnesses,” said Julia. Suddenly they were having to hold Nea up as her strength gave out. They guided her to a hay bale next to the barn wall, sat her down. She was shaking. “Thomas is all right.”

Nea shook her head. “He’s not the one I’m worried about.”

Julia sat next to her. “What’s the worse they can do to her? It’s not a charge they can take to a judge and without a criminal court they can’t sentence her to death. Can they?”

Nea was staring blankly at the ground. “They can bind her.”

Hecuba covered her mouth, failed to suppress a shudder of horror.



Thomas was certain he was lost. He had lost any semblance of a path nearly an hour ago and was scratched and snagged, had bits of leaf and bramble clinging to the fringes of his borrowed clothes. He stopped to take a breath, trying to get his bearings. The bush to the left of him seemed less a solid wall than the ones in front of him and the one to the right had thorns two inches long. He was deciding if he should attempt the left or go back when something hit his head, got caught in his forelock and fell in his face. He grabbed at it in a momentary panic, not certain what it was or if it was a spider or not. It turned out to be a feather. It was small, less than eight inches long and mostly dark with a bit of white that mottled in on the widest vane where the furry tendrils were. He wasn’t sure what kind of feather it was. There were also cobwebs on it.

He looked up, half expecting to see the bird that shed it above him somewhere. Instead, he saw a huge spider web with a large golden orange spider busily picking another feather out of the web. The feather cut free of the upper web tumbled down, clinging to a lower portion about a foot above Thomas’s head. Hesitantly he reached up grabbed the loose end with two fingers and lightly pulled. It came free with only a little resistance. The spider stopped a moment, its legs touching various threads, getting a feel for what was and was not in the web, then turned and bent to repairing the damaged section before moving on to a couple other feathers further down.

Thomas looked down at the two feathers in his hands. They were the same size, the same colour, the same shape though opposites. Even the colouration was the same as far as he could tell. His hands began to tremble. They couldn’t be, he thought. Why not? “Best thing to do is show them to someone and ask,” he said.

The Speaker

“All I can do.” He looked back up at the web. “*Thank you, Grandmother,*” he said.

He quickly cleaned off the webbing, made sure he had a secure hold of them and plunged into the bush on the left. The other side was a few feet of rocky ground and a five foot tall wall of bushes covered in white bell-like flower clusters. This was odd. He followed the line down the slope figuring there had to be a break somewhere. There wasn't; but at the end of it he found more forest. This part of the wood had less underbrush, the trees were more widely spaced and there was an obvious trail cutting through it diagonal across the slope one leading up one leading down. He paused on it trying to decide if he was above or below the village.

His stomach growled. He had not eaten since the powwow the night before. The wind shifted slightly and brought him the welcome fragrance of something roasting on an open fire. And the smell was coming from the upward path. He turned and immediately began trudging up it.



Joseph and Anang were sitting down on the porch to a dinner of leftovers with her foster parents when Thomas trudded up looking like he'd rolled down the hill instead of walked. Anang's foster mother got to him before either of them guided him to a chair and made him sit down, pressing a cup into his hand.

“Drink, then talk,” she said.

He sipped at the tea, felt it whet his appetite as well as returning some strength to his tired body. “Thank you,” he mumbled.

“I take it you haven't eaten,” Joe surmised, went in the house to make an extra plate.

Thomas leaned his head against the high back of the chair. “I'm all right, really. I just took a walk,” he said after a few minutes of people watching him as if he were about to collapse any moment.

“All day?” Anang said, with a raised brow. “People have been looking for you.”

“Sorry. I ...got a little lost. But I found my way without any injuries. I found these,” he said, holding up the feathers.

Joseph came out the door as he held them up, traded them for a plate and fork. “Eat,” he ordered. He sat down turning the feathers over in his hands. He looked over at Thomas with widened eyes. “Where did you get these?”

Thomas paused long enough to swallow what he had hungrily shoved in his mouth. “Are they what I think they are?”

The Speaker

“Two identical golden eagle feathers?” he said sarcastically passing them to his father-in-law who asked to see them.

Thomas groaned. “So they *are* eagle feathers.”

Anang’s mother frowned. “Why is that a problem, young man? It is an honour to have them. A great gift you have been given to find them.”

Her husband apologized for her, “She has never left the reservation in her life. She does not know. Honey,” he said, “he is a white man. It is illegal for him to have them. The white man says only First Nations may have them. Where did you find them?” he asked, repeating his son-in-law’s question.

Thomas told them.

Joseph smiled. “So... you gonna give Nea one of them?”

Thomas almost choked on the potatoes, had to drink something to get it down. “Oh, that’d be a fine how’d’ya’do,” he growled. “First I cause all this trouble with her aunt and then I compound it by giving her illegal feathers? Come on, Joseph. Even she’ll need a permit.” Joseph continued to stare at him as if he had not yet answered him. Thomas groaned. “If I were allowed to, hell yes! Oh, sorry, ma’am,” he blushed, glancing at Anang’s foster mother. “There is this little problem of \$5,000 and a year in prison... per feather.”

Joseph chuckled, as if that were no matter. “But if that were not the case, you’d be giving one of these to Nea, yes?”

Thomas sighed, gave up, merely nodded his head and continued to feed his hungry stomach.

“Good. Then I can fix the getting caught with it part.”

Thomas stared at him, freezing mid-chew. After a second or two he made a sign with his hands of ‘how?’ Joseph just laughed, picking up his own plate and digging in.

By the time they had finished eating, Anang and her mother had dressed up the two feathers, fastening a piece of sinew to each with bone beads to decorate them and make it easier to tie them onto something. Thomas accepted them back with his thanks, still feeling a little depressed. He blindly followed Joseph off the porch.

“I mean, I was asking for answers and this is as clear an answer as I’m going to get but... why couldn’t it have been a non-regulated bird?”

Joseph laughed, leading him down an uneven path along the lower woods. “Wouldn’t have meant the same. Unless they were hummingbird feathers. Hummingbirds are for love, but still not the same.”

The Speaker

“I saw some,” he said. “Before I got to the blueberry fields. In fact, I think that’s how I lost the trail altogether, following one. Actually, I think there were three of them, chasing one another.” He looked around him, saw an old birch bark dome nestled on the edge of the woods. It was an old native styled lodge. Then he saw Tuwe walking away from it scratching his head.

Joseph slowed down ‘til he was beside Thomas, clapped him soundly on the back. “See? I told you! But it doesn’t mean what the twins mean. And we’re here.” He spread his hand to indicate a very old, almost run-down looking cabin. The walls were grey and very weathered, covered in places with peeling birch bark.

“Where is here?”

Joseph knocked on the door. An ancient little man with dreamy eyes opened it. He smiled up at Joseph. “*Come for a pipe, young Redwing?*” he asked.

“*It’s Redbird, Pipestone. But no,*” he said clearly, stepping out of the way and pulling Thomas in front. “*This boy needs some wonders worked.*”

The old man smiled, nodding, gestured for them to follow him into the house.

Joseph bent to Thomas’s ear. “You *did* bring some tobacco with you, didn’t you?”

Thomas shook his head.

“No matter, I think I have some,” he said, pushing Thomas ahead of him into the one room dwelling. “Might want to start carrying some with you though.”

The room was dark but warm, lit only by a fire. There was no furniture, just furs thrown comfortably in front of the fireplace. The old man sank into his favourite spot, rubbing his hands together. “*Now, what can old Pipestone do for you, youngun?*” he said.

Thomas sat across from him, passed him the feathers.

The old man squinted at them, leaned back towards the fire, stared wide-eyed at Thomas, then Joseph. “*These are eagle feathers,*” he said.

“*Yes, grandfather,*” Thomas said, still not sure what the old man could do for him.

He looked at Joseph. “*These are eagle feathers!*”

“*Eagle gave them to him,*” Joseph said proudly.

“Technically,” Thomas injected, shifted to Ojibwe. “*Actually it was Grandmother Spider gave me. Dropped one in my hair,*” he added, brushing at it self-consciously.

“*But... but he’s white,*” the old man gasped.

Joseph chuckled. “*Hence the problem.*”

The Speaker

“But he’s white,” he insisted, unable to get his head around the idea that eagle would give such treasures to a white man.

“But he wants to be one with us,” Joseph explained. *“He loves our little Speaker. He understands and respects what they mean. He asked for guidance and this is what the spirits sent him. Can you fix things? So he will not be caught out by the game warden?”*

The man’s expression changed to one of mischievous glee. *“Old Hook-nose? Gladly. But... you understand what you are asking, saying by giving one of these to a girl?”* he asked Thomas suddenly.

Thomas nodded. *“Yes, sir. Without her I cannot fly. Without her I cannot breathe. I want to be with her even when I cannot be. I know what she is, what she means to tribe. I have seen her change her forms, I...”*

Pipestone interrupted. *“Change forms?”* He looked at Joseph. *“Our Speaker is a Shaper?”* he gasped.

Joseph nodded. *“What, Spider hasn’t told you?”*

He waved a hand dismissively. *“If she did I wasn’t listening. Twin feathers for our little Silver Mountain,”* he sighed. He threw up his empty hand, dangling the feathers by their sinew in the other. *“Ah, who am I to argue with the spirits? Eh? Give me a bit. I will bring them with me to the council. Give them to you when it is over. I should have them done by then.”*

Joseph got up when the elder did, pulled Thomas to his feet. Thomas still had a question. *“If I may ask, elder? What going do to them?”*

The man cackled with glee. *“When I’m done Old Hook-nose won’t see nothing out of place! Hide it in plain sight! You could tickle his beak with it and all he’d do is sneeze and tell you t’ ‘git that mite-infested refuse outta my face!”*

Thomas left with Joseph, waited until they were on the darkening path before asking, *“Who is old hook-nose?”*

“Local game warden. Or he used to be. Heard he died a while back. Ol’ Pipestone and he went back a few decades over one thing or another, always feuding. Had a real prominent beak. Now I have to get you back to the house and cleaned up before the Council. Can’t have you come in looking like that.”

Thomas groaned. He did not want to be reminded of the eminent Council.



The Speaker

The council lodge was crowded. The elders sat in a half circle around the fire, the rest of the on-lookers completing the circle and filling the rest of the room to its narrow walls. It was simply not made to hold this many people. Thomas sat on one side of the fire in the middle of the circle, Daki'inde on the other, both facing the elder council, now short one member. Mitena was filling in, sitting close to Elk Whistle and looking very uncomfortable with the position. There were no young people in here, no children. No one who was not of age was allowed for this. It helped to limit who was inside.

One by one the witnesses were brought in, beginning with Nea and Gaganan who only glanced once at her aunt then sat down on the north side of the fire, between it and the elders, her back to both accused and victim. The elders questioned her about the night before, what had led to her flight into the woods. She answered them, her arm around the cat, taking strength from him and her lover sitting behind her. She could just feel the edge of his 'safe zone', could sense his eyes on her back. She told them what had been said between her aunt and herself. They nodded and indicated she should sit down on the outer edge of the circle beside the elders. Being the accused's only kin she had that right. She sat down next to Mitena, who put her arm around Nea, comforting her. Gaganan curled up in her lap.

Next Hecuba was brought in, though she was wearing her own clothes, a plain, flared dress in dark red. There was a gasp from around the room, murmurs. Falling Elk cleared his throat, announcing loudly that Hecuba was a wonder worker as well as a witness and had the right to be formally questioned. There was a snort from Daki' but she said nothing. The same questions were put to her. "What I heard, I did not understand," she said. "But it began as an sneered remark. It was met with defensive tones from Sooneawa and Memenqwa. Then the elder snarled something and Sooneawa retaliated. They argued and Sooneawa ran into the woods in tears. That was when she pointed at Thomas and chanted a spell."

There were more murmurs. Elk Whistle held up his hand and they fell silent. "How do you know it was a spell?" he asked kindly. "You said you do not understand our words."

She nodded. "I do not speak Ojibwe, but I see auras and magic. What I saw come from her, coalesce on her hands and streak towards his chest was dark blue and streaked with white, almost crystalline. It was like watching a bundle of icicles growing in fast motion, dagger-like points aimed for his heart. They stopped as far from him as I am to you."

The Speaker

“Just stopped?” asked Mitena.

Hecuba nodded. “Yes, elder. They just continued to grow and grow from her, but four feet out from him they just stopped existing. Like they passed through a door we could not see. After a moment, she seemed to realize it did not work, grunted and stalked off.”

“Thank you, Hecuba,” said Falling Elk with a wave of his hand towards the door when no one else had any questions.

Hecuba got up and left and others came in, one by one. Each were asked the same questions, each gave similar answers according to what they had been able to see. All those who had been in the group that night came in, including Meme and Tuwe. All of them said that the curse she had spoken would have frozen his heart. They had all been asked, “Could the words she chose have been meant to cool his emotions towards the one he loves?” All of them shook their heads. “The words she chose were meant to kill,” insisted Meme quietly. “The manifestation of it proclaims its intent. Even I felt the chill in the air.”

Others came, their words bringing tears to Nea’s eyes. They claimed they saw Daki’ approach the hammock where Thomas slept this morning and flip it, engaged him in an argument that began in English with him restraining himself admirably, but ended in retaliation in heated Ojibwe. Not all words were heard, but all witnesses agree they saw her begin a spell. Finally Thomas was called to speak his words of witness. Reluctantly, he answered their questions, told them what had been said as best he could remember. He seemed almost ashamed by what he had said to her. “I told her that the more she pushed Nea to come home the harder she would resist. I know this because I have seen it in the young many times. My own father ran away to war before he was truly old enough because a relative wanted things for him he did not feel were in his heart. I then... asked her what He would do if He woke and found her gone, asked who would feel His wrath.” His tone left no doubt the identity of the ‘He’ referred to. “Then... I said some things that were between me and the elder. Things I should not have said, hurtful but true. I will not repeat them here. Please do not ask me to.”

“We will respect your sense of honour,” said Falling Elk. He raised his voice to carry in the room, “I who heard these words say that they have no bearing on this matter, though they show a great understanding of this young brave for our ways and what is in this woman’s heart,” he said, indicating the silent Daki’. “It does not excuse her actions, however.” He turned to her, his eyes cold and sharp and they met and held hers. “What you have done not only shames us, but endangers our

entire way of life. Set aside what you have done over the years to your niece. Set aside the words and manners unbecoming an elder. What remains is the fact that you tried to kill a white man on our land. You have endangered the treaty; attempted an act that would bring the government crawling through here, overturning every leaf and twig, running the risk of exposing our true way of life. That is unforgivable. If you had done it for love, however misguided, the fact that it came to naught might have enabled us to overlook it. But that you did it for personal pride and jealousy... that makes it unforgivable. Do you have anything to say for yourself before we pass judgement?"

Daki' remained stubbornly silent. She was angry with herself for losing her temper that much, for not doing it more subtly, for failing yet still having to pay the price.

The chief sighed. "Very well then. Thomas, as the victim, do you have anything you wish to say before we pass judgement?"

"Yes, elder," he said. "I do." He had been thinking long and hard about what to do when this moment came as he had been told it would. His eyes had passed over old Pipestone, nodding slightly to some drum beat only he could hear. He remembered the feathers, and an image of the spider picking them out of her web then repairing it behind them had given him an idea. "I understand why she did it. And you are right, were she protecting her niece it could be forgiven. But her rage, at herself as well as the world around her, is also understandable. I know what she tried to do to me. I know that left unpunished she will try to find a way to make those she perceives as at fault pay. I have been told by Lizard's Voice that if I do not press these charges Sooneawa will spend her days in tears and that I cannot bear. But if I press them I have other problems. Like it or not, they are kin, and I will be responsible for removing the last drop of her blood from this earth. This will poison us. That I cannot have either. But Spider," his eyes flicked to the blind elder seated with her great Raven behind her and bowed his head, corrected himself, "*Grandmother* Spider has shown me another way."

There were murmurs. Spider Yellowbuck spoke, the ghost of a grin playing at the edges of her mouth. "*And tell me, Medicine Shield,*" she said, "*you who cannot be touched by the spirits. How did one such as you receive spirit visions?*"

He smiled in spite of himself, bowed to her. "*Because, grandmother, I learned to hear with my eyes.*" She smiled, nodded back to him. He continued in English, the one common language in the room as there were some from other tribes here whose Ojibwe was worse than his. "In white courts they have a tradition. The

prosecutor may offer a deal to alter the sentence, agreeing to a punishment before the judge can pass one. The accused has the right to accept, or refuse and leave their fate to the jury and judge.” He looked over at Daki’ for the first time since they had entered. She was glaring at him warily. He turned back to the council and bowed. “As I, the victim, am a white man, will you honour this tradition of my people in this matter?”

In the crowd, Joseph nodded, proud that the boy had learned his lessons well. The summer they had spent with his people had taught the young man how to ask for things in ways that increased his chances of getting them. Respect went a long way, as did asking for respect, and ‘tradition’? Well, it was just a magical word.

The elders whispered amongst themselves for a moment then Falling Elk nodded. “You may place this ‘offer’ before the accused. It is up to her to honour it or not. We will respect your ways as you have tried to honour ours.”

Thomas glanced at Nea, whispered ‘forgive me’ before turning to Daki’. He faced her fully and laid his cards on the table. “I will turn my back on the fact that you tried to kill me, forget the words we have spoken, the words you have said to Sooneawa. But there is a condition. From this day forward you set aside any claim on Sooneawa. You forget who she is, who she was to you. Lay all ties aside as you claimed to have done ten years ago. You treat her as you would *any other member of this tribe*. You never again try to influence her or her choices. You never raise a hand or a word against her... or one of her own,” he added. “I will not have those who cannot defend themselves against your magic, like Julia, suffer your wrath in our stead. In short, you forget your grudge against her. Use whatever method you need to *on yourself*, treat her as if she were dead, I do not care. Only leave her alone. If one day you find you can come to her in peace and love, I will welcome you as her kin.”

“You?” she croaked, the only word she had spoken since entering the lodge.

“Her acceptance of you is not for me to give. That you will have to ask of her. If she turns you away, so will I. But your offer had best be genuine. I doubt you will get more than one.” With that said, Thomas turned back to face the council, his eyes locked with Nea’s.

The council put their heads together for several moments. There was a great deal of discussion. Only Spider did not speak, merely sat and watched Thomas and Nea through the raven’s great turning head. She was smiling. Finally she nodded. The raven winked.

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Chief Falling Elk sighed. He looked at the aunt. “Daki’inde Majiwe,” he said. “Do you accept this man’s proposal?”

Clearly reluctant, she nodded. “I do,” she nearly spat.

“Good. That settles the matter against the man Thomas Harlan.”

She looked up sharply, realizing by his tone that there was something else afoot.

“The matter of the Tribe has also been decided. While the charge of attempted murder is a grave one, you have been forgiven of that by the only one who has that right. But your actions endangered the whole of the Mainganoden and every Wonder Worker we have ever fostered. That he cannot forgive, nor can it go unpunished.” The chief held up his hand when Thomas took a breath as if to speak, horrified that what he was trying to prevent would be undone. “Because you have made this deal of your own will we cannot in good faith punish you in full accordance with our laws.” The old woman exhaled suddenly in relief though she remained tense. “But because you have behaved in a manner shameful to one of the elder council it is our decision that you be removed from it.”

Had this been a white court, it would have erupted at this point, in protest, exclamations of relief, general conversation. It remained silent. Daki’ rose, threw something into the fire that popped and hissed then bowed to the council and walked out of the lodge. The Chief stood, arched his back until bones audibly popped. “Now,” he said. “I believe we are still in the middle of a powwow? To the drum circle and let us leave this nasty business behind us where it belongs.”

Everyone began filing out. No one started talking until they got outside where they mingled with those who had stood witness or not been able to fit and told them what had happened. Thomas remained where he was, tired and drained. Nea did not move, but watched once everyone else had left the lodge as her elders rose and crossed to the fire.

Elk Whistle nudged Thomas, who seemed to snap out of his stupor and tossed something in his hand into the fire. It too popped and hissed. One by one, the elders dropped something into the flames. Thomas moved out of the way as they gathered in a circle around the fire, held out their spread hands, edges touching, and began to chant. They raised their arms to the smoke hole above them, then slowly lowered them. As they did, the fire dimmed, then went out.

Nea stepped to Thomas’s side in the sudden dark, took his hand. They clung to each other, relieved and grateful, but drained by the event.

Suddenly, two green lights sprang to life in the corner of the lodge. Thomas shifted his body to shield Nea from it, watching warily over his shoulder as the

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lights grew brighter. She touched her fingers to his lips, and moved so she could see. She was relaxed in his arms so he let her, though he was still uncertain.

The lights moved forward awkwardly, going up then down, then waddling oddly. As the light grew, began to cast a pale glow on the six elders gathered around the dead fire, they opened the circle to allow it to pass. Eventually, Thomas was able to make out that it was a man in a mask and a voluminous costume that made him look like a giant frog. The form bent over the dead fire, sweeping the cold embers from one hand into another and held them close to its breast, then hopped towards the doorway. The glow vanished at the 'flap' but Thomas was aware that the door never opened.

Beside him another light flared, this time it was a silver Zippo with an RCAF emblem on it. Elk Whistle held it up, stood out of the way to give the others enough light to see their way out of the room. Thomas and Nea allowed the elders to go first. Thomas waited until they were outside before approaching Elk Whistle. "That is a beautiful lighter, sir," he said. "May I ask where you got it?"

The old man grinned. "Sergeant Elk Whistle Walleye, 12th Bomber Group RCAF," he said proudly. "Earthquaker."

Thomas was floored. "Wow.. My dad was over there." The old man's eyes narrowed for a second in disbelief. Thomas laughed. "Yea, I get that a lot. Mom was his second wife, they had me late in life. Not to mention Dad lied about his age to get in," he chuckled as they began to walk towards the stomp grounds where even now the drums could be heard.

Elk Whistle laughed himself. "So did a lot of young men. Where'd your dad serve?"

"The 6th."

The old man nodded. "We'll have to talk later. I could tell you stories about Africa if you are interested."

"I would be," he smiled. "I have a few myself, if I remember them right, if you like."

"That would be good."

As they walked to the stomp grounds, Thomas asked Nea quietly. "Did I do good? Or did I royally screw things up?"

She squeezed tighter. "You did the best that could be done. I do not know how this will end up, but she will not be able to touch us now. If she does she risks more than lost position and she knows it."

"What... what was with the guy in the frog mask?" he dared.

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She smiled. "Frog is cleansing medicine. He collected the ashes of the trial fire. One of the hands is a broom and the other a dustpan," she added as he frowned trying to figure out how he'd done it. "Then he takes them out and buries them. Hopefully, burying everything associated with it. Thus the matter is ended and no one can bring it up."

"Neal!" Meme yelled waving her over.

"Oh, she must have it done," Nea said excitedly.

"What done?"

"My medicine bag. She made it with the blood from last night. There is a great deal of power in that blood."

He made a face. "Ok. You go talk to her. I have to go see Pipestone about something anyway," he said as they neared the crowd where the drummers sat and the dancers cavorted around them as if nothing had just happened.

"Ok," she said equally confused. The two of them split up.

Meme handed her a small leather bag that had been decorated with black crow beads in the shape of a bird in flight. "Oh, I forgot to tell you..." Nea began frowning at the sight of the shiny little beads. She stopped, examined them more closely in the light of the bonfire. "Oh, these are bone!" she exclaimed. "How did you know to use bone?"

Meme grinned. "A little bird told me."

"A raven," Hecuba said dropped down beside them. "Wow, that was some experience! I've never been so nervous in my life," she breathed.

"Thank you, Meme," Nea said hugging her for the medicine bag and then hugged Hecuba. "You did good."

"So," she sighed. "Everything turn out right in the end I hear?"

Julia joined them. "They said cause I wasn't a wonder worker I couldn't add anything that wasn't already said so I didn't have to speak. But I did get to watch from the back of the room."

"Clever boy, your niinimoshenh," mused Tuwe. "Used the only leverage she would respect to get her to leave you alone. Took a big chance."

"Think she'll ever come to ya'll 'in peace and love?'" Julia asked.

Nea did not answer but looked to Tuwe. He stared off into the fire for a long moment, then shook his head. "If she will I cannot see it. There is too much in the way."

"So why did you wear the red dress?" Nea asked.

The Speaker

Hecuba pointed to Meme. “Her idea. Said it would show that I was on the Red Road. Said it would help with appearances.”

Julia suddenly nudge Nea and asked without pointing, “Hey, who is that?”

They looked up. The man in the frog suit had joined the dancers hopping about in a convincing frog-like manner. He was very funny hopping around the dancers, pausing now and again to ‘kiss’ the foreheads of some of them mostly the girls.

The howl of a wolf suddenly filled the night and another dancer joined them, this one clothed in a wolf skin. One of the existing dancers huddled down as the wolf jumped over her, seemed to swell in size and darken in colour until she stood and roared. Above her, moving as she did, as if attached to her like a giant reversed marionette was a bear. It was nearly solid, a black bear that joined the dancing swatting at the wolf if he played too closely. Three other dancers did the same, folded up and stood again with great shadowy animals above them: an elk, a beaver and a hawk. The other dancers slipped off.

Meme gave Nea a gentle push towards the circle. “Go on,” she whispered. “Show them how it’s *really* done,” she grinned. “About time the whole tribe knew anyway.”

“I couldn’t!” she protested.

“You should,” Tuwe said. “It will help. Dancing will drive all that out of your head,” he said waving his fingers at her head as if it were full of muck and cobwebs.

The others urged her as well, even Gaganan, who stood on hind paws and pushed on her back with his front. Finally she growled and got up. She slipped the empty medicine pouch around her neck and stepped into the circle joining the animal dancers. As she began the slow, hopping steps, she turned, came face to face with the bear woman. They bowed to each other and danced away. Nea did this with each of the dancers, who made efforts to seek her out once they realized who had joined them. She took the time to get into the rhythm to feel the drums in her blood.

Slowly, she began to do what came naturally. She shifted. Caught up in the beat and the lone flute, her transition was smooth. The gathered tribe watched, those who could see such things with mouths agape, as the spirits crowded around her, danced on the field with the human dancers. One by one the spirits passed through Nea. One by one she took their forms, continuing to dance as she changed from puma to elk to bear to beaver to wolf until a bird spirit plunged from the sky and entered her. She left the ground a great golden eagle, soared upwards on the

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thermals from the fire, gave a shrill cry which was answered from the dark mountainside. She drifted to the ground, her moccasins touching the trampled earth in the final steps of the dance. Once her body was completely human again she walked sedately back to her place outside the circle among her friends.

The drummers stopped, everyone looked towards Nea. The dance circle was empty now. Whispers began to circulate of surprise and shock. Some of the children were laughing and bragging about 'how they knew' and began telling of her swim with the otter in the pond as an otter. Soon there was a far more celebratory atmosphere and people were jumping up to dance from sheer joy and exuberance. The tribe had been blessed: there was a Shaper among them.

It was not long before someone came up to her asking if she would help him out tomorrow with one of his dogs, find out what her problem was. Nea agreed, sighed.

"You'll have to get used to that," Meme grinned.

Nea laughed, "Yea, I guess."

She felt him before she heard him, felt the calm slip over her like an umbrella going up in the rain. She turned. Thomas had a look in his eyes she could not decipher. He held his hand down to her. "Kitten, would you take a walk with me?"

She narrowed her eyes, trying to guess what he was up to, but took his hand and allowed him to lead her away. She looked back at her friends but they were all shrugging or looking blankly at her. As they were walking off she heard Tuwe muttering, "I thought he did that already?"

"Thomas, what are you up to?" she asked as they moved out of the noise of the drum circle which was now in full roar as the tribe danced to celebrate the revelation.

He didn't answer her until they reached an apple tree where a lantern was hanging from a low branch. There was a blanket spread on the grass below it. "Thomas, what is this? Surely you don't intend... right here? What has gotten into you?" she laughed feeling her cheeks flush.

He pulled her down beside him on the blanket. "I just... want to talk... right now."

"All right," she said looking into his eyes, trying to read them in the dim light.

"I've been trying all day to figure out not only how to do this but if I should or not. This is no light step. Last night was irreversible, but not entered into without conscious thought. What began in heated passion did not end that way I think."

"I don't know," she blushed. "Seemed pretty heated to me."

The Speaker

He brushed a strand of hair from her face, lingered to caress her cheek. “That’s not what I meant. I meant we did not make the decision in passion. We knew what we were doing. We were not blinded by desire. Which is why I think this will not be unwelcome,” he said, setting one of the two feathers in her hand. “At least I hope not,” he breathed.

It took Nea a moment to realize what was in her hand. The light was dim and she had only seen one once and that had been yesterday morning. “Is this...?” she gasped.

He held up the other one. “I found them today. Kind of funny too... I’d been wondering how to get a pair ever since I heard you telling Hecuba and Julia about them in the cafeteria.”

Nea laughed, still in shock. “That was a long time ago.”

“Yeah, then I found out they were eagle feathers and despaired. But Pipestone made these right. He said only a Wonder Worker will see them as eagle feathers. So they are even more secret than normal,” he chuckled. He saw tears in her eyes, reached up to wipe one of them away. “Please tell me those mean you’re happy. I’ve hurt you enough for one day.”

She gave a choked laugh through her tears. “You have never hurt me,” she said, kissing him.

“I cannot fly without you,” he murmured into her hair. “The thought of living my life without you steals my breath away. I want to do this right, but... I don’t know how. I know this is the first step: letting you know.”

She looked into his eyes. “Thomas Harlan, are you asking me to marry you?”

“Yeah, I guess I am,” he said. “And doing a rat-poor job of it apparently.”

She held her feather up, tapped him on the nose with it. “Hey, not every girl gets a twin feather for a proposal, you know. You have no idea what Tuwe went through to get his. Luckily, his uncle knows someone in the American Wildlife Department who handles the permits and got his request expedited on account of the ‘wedding’. He had been waiting for almost two years already. Where did you find them?”

Thomas held her close, laughing. “Yellowbuck sent me down this crazy path that had me crawling through hawthorn across gorges and ended up in the blueberry fields. On the way I found these in a spider web. The spider was picking them out and throwing them away. That is also what gave me the idea how to deal with your aunt.”

“See,” she smiled. “You *can* learn to hear the spirits.”

The Speaker

“That’s what Yellowbuck said. Now,” he sighed, giving Gaganan’s neck a scratch as he came up, began sniffing the two feathers. “What’s the next step? Tuwe said something about family negotiation but... in your case who do I ask?”

“Well, first,” she said settling back against him, “you have to declare your intentions to my family which in this case can just be the elder council. Then you just live with us for a while. Eventually you’ll have to get your mother up here. They’ll talk, make sure this is ok with everybody then we’re just married.”

“Sounds easy enough. But there’s just a question of where we live. Tuwe said something about having to move in with his mother-in-law until the house was built. In our case I don’t have one mother-in-law I have what...fifty?”

Nea laughed. “No. Actually you have less to worry about than most. You won’t have the intense scrutiny Tuwe had. You just have to show the tribe in general that you can and will take care of me. But the where *is* an issue,” she added, trying to think.

There’s always the Tradition House, Gaganan mused washing his paw.

“True,” she said, lighting up. She turned in his arms, looked Thomas in the eye. “You afraid of a little ‘camping out?’”

“What?” he asked startled by her sudden excitement. “No. I love camping. Why?”

“Then come on. I have an idea, but I’ll have to ask,” she jumped up pulling him to his feet and dragging him back towards the drum circle.

He followed, but she did not take him to the outer edge like he expected. Instead she dragged him to where the elders sat as the Chief and his brother were just sitting down after taking a turn at the dancing. Falling Elk was breathing heavy and both men were laughing. When he saw Nea standing off to the side with Thomas he waved them over, able to tell she wanted to speak with him. “What can I do for you young pups?” he asked accepting a cup of water from Seven Trees. “Thank you.”

“Well, Thomas and I want to know if we can stay in the Tradition House for the rest of the week?” she said in a rush afraid she would lose her courage.

They stopped laughing looked from one to the other. “Both of you?” asked Elk Whistle.

Nea nodded, clinging tighter to Thomas’s hand.

“Yes sir,” he said.

The Chief’s eyes fell on Thomas studying him inside and out. “Finally declaring your intentions are you?” he asked, taking a sip of water.

Thomas squared his shoulders spoke firmly. “Yes, elder, I am.”

The Speaker

Those near enough to hear what was going on began murmuring.

“Good,” the Chief said at last nodding his head. “I see no problem with letting you use the Tradition House.” He looked to either side of him to the other elders. “Anyone object?”

Everyone shook their heads. He nodded. “Fine then. But you have to acquire your own furs and furnishings.”

“Thank you, grandfather!” Nea exclaimed, and she and Thomas ran off to where Hecuba and the others were sitting.

“What was that all about?” Julia asked.

“We were asking permission to sleep in the Tradition House,” Thomas said. “Whatever that is.”

Tuwe shook his head. “Explains why you weren’t there yesterday,” he groaned.

“There is a lodge on the edge of the village built in the traditional manner,” Meme explained. “We keep it to honour tradition. We keep it livable because we sometimes use it for vision quests, getting back in touch with our ancestors and their ways, or for the fun of it,” she shrugged. “So does this mean you two have declared?”

Nea held up the eagle feather still in her hand. Meme’s eyes popped. “How? Where?”

Thomas sighed, told them how he had found the feathers.

Julia frowned. Everyone, even Hecuba, was going nuts over the feathers. She didn’t get it. “What is so great about a pair of turkey feathers? Y’all’re goin’ on like they were those twin eagles Nea told us about.”

Everyone stopped and stared at her. Thomas chuckled. “I guess the charm works. Thanks, Julia, I was worried for a bit there.”

“What charm?”

He explained.

“I still don’t...” Julia began.

Hecuba leaned in. “It’s a glamour. Only magic people can see through it. So he won’t get in trouble for owning an eagle feather.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed. Then thought of something. “Well I guess that means you can’t have any real turkey feathers then, cause you won’t be able to tell which one’s really an eagle.”

Thomas smiled. “Um, I see it as an eagle feather.”

Julia frowned again. “I guess he exempted you somehow?”

The Speaker

He rubbed the back of his neck with embarrassment. "I... seem to be... immune to magic."

Hecuba crowed, "THAT explains it!"

Tuwe spoke suddenly, "Meme'll give you some furs for tonight, blankets. I'll round up some firewood. You're going to need it."



The rest of the week passed almost too quickly. Newin had come up with an idea and dragged Hecuba off for several days to work on it. Julia enjoyed herself immensely with Mitena's granddaughters, swimming, hiking, riding horses. Even Lulabelle enjoyed herself playing with a pine marten that was someone's Niiiji. Thomas spent his days learning to hunt with some of the men. Joseph had taught him to use a bow the summer before and he was getting much better. He managed on the second day to bring down a deer, though it had taken several arrows and not all his.

To his surprise they did not criticize him for not making a clean kill but showed him better places to aim for and said that it was a good buck and that he would get better. Thomas offered to share it with the man who helped him kill it, insisting that he could not eat the whole buck before he had to leave and that he could not take it home with him. As they carried the kill back to the village he heard a couple of them talking in Ojibwe forgetting that he understood a great deal. "*Beginner's luck. Nea will starve if he hunts alone.*"

"*He was never taught as we were. I remember how bad you were your first hunt.*"

"I was nine."

"*He is trying and that is more than I can say for most white men who would be asking for a compound bow or a rifle.*"

Thomas remembered that the hunters of Joseph's tribe used rifles without shame and asked him about it later. "Is it pride or tradition that makes them insist on bows?" he asked that evening.

"Compound versus traditional, that is a matter of pride. The rifle? That is wisdom. They make too much noise and that would offend you-know-who. The loud crack of a gun they are sure would wake Him up. So they hunt with quiet weapons."

"Ah! Makes sense," he nodded. "We let the old serpent sleep."

Joseph laughed.

Nea spent a lot of time at Meme's working on a medicine bag for Thomas when she wasn't helping out around the village with people who had animal issues. She had been delighted that Thomas had managed to have a successful hunt and insisted on cooking it herself. They had enjoyed a completely traditional meal cooked the old way over an open fire with bread baked on heated rocks. They had shared with Meme, Tuwe and the girls. It was not the best, but it was more than passable. It had been Nea's first try.

Thomas spent the days after the hunt talking with various people, learning what he could. Gibuu, whom Tuwe had mentioned the first day, turned out to be a Nisga'a Tribesman who was up to visit his son who had been fostered here. He spent the whole day talking with him about his people and their customs and writing down his observations.

In all it was an enjoyable week for everyone. On the last night they held another drum circle and Newin and Hecuba revealed what they had been working on. The two of them did a special dance together... with their snakes. Hecuba wore a red buckskin dress, representing the Red Road and Newin a black tunic, representing the Black Road, both 'dyed' by Tamai for the occasion. They were very pleased with how it turned out.

All too soon it was time for them to leave again. Nea made sure she took back their borrowed 'furnishings' returning the donated furs and blankets to their owners with her thanks. She and Thomas cleaned out the lodge, made a few minor needed repairs, leaving it in slightly better condition than they had found it. As they were packing up she noticed that Thomas was wearing the same leathers he had been loaned for the powwow. "Are you going to give those back or not?" she laughed.

"Nope. They're actually mine now," he grinned. "I traded for them."

She tickled his ribs to get him to move out of her way so she could reach her bag. She had decided to change into jeans and a regular shirt for the trip back. "Well, you should at least have traded for something new," she quipped pulling her jeans on under her dress.

"What do I own that *is* new?" he laughed. "Everything is either handed down from my father or bought second hand. Besides," he added snatching her up as she folded her dress, "What I traded them for wasn't new either," he grinned.

She gave his medicine bag a light tug. "This is new," she remarked, tried to wiggle out of his grip.

"No," he grinned.

The Speaker

She huffed. “I made it with my own hands, down to the beaded medicine shield on it,” she snapped.

He pulled her closer. “No, I meant you’re not getting away,” he chuckled. “And that’s not new either. The buck wore it first.”

She popped him playfully. “We don’t have time for this.”

He picked her up, laid her on the only fur she had not folded and put away. “There is always time for this,” he said.

Gaganan got up and stalked out of the lodge, growling to himself. *There’ll be kittens by winter at this rate.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN:

The Calm

Julia stood outside the student union building staring at her watch waiting for Hecuba. “If she doesn’t hurry up, we’ll be late,” she grumbled.

Hecuba’s voice rang out across the courtyard as she ran over with a small shirt box in hand. “It’s done! Miko finished it last night!” she exclaimed.

As she darted across the busy courtyard, dodging people, she was slammed into by someone who was not paying attention to his surroundings. The box flew from her hands, landed on the pavement along with a package of photo paper and a few plastic bottles of developer fluid, which fortunately did not come open.

Henry immediately darted after the rolling bottles, bumped his head into hers as they grabbed for the same container, saw who it was and scowled. “Watch it, witch!” he growled, not meaning it literally.

Hecuba stiffened, her hand still on the other bottle. She glared at him with narrowed eyes, their smoky, kohl lining giving the expression menace. “What did you call me?” she hissed.

He hesitated, thrown off by her reaction. He snatched up the bottle in his hand and the photo paper and stood, “What, are you going to turn me into a toad?” he sneered.

She seethed, slammed the bottle in her hand against his chest and snarled, “Now why would I want to make you attractive?”

The Speaker

Julia had crossed over, picked up the box and followed Hecuba as she tossed her hair and stormed out of the courtyard. She turned to Henry and just shrugged helplessly at him.

Hecuba was in a foul mood. She had gone from delight to storm clouds in an instant and was growling and grumbling under her breath things Julia wasn't sure she wanted made clearer. She tried to distract her as she followed her towards one of their mutual classes. "So this is it? What'd Miko say?"

"That I have to bring you by tomorrow to look at the costumes. She wants opinions, approval, adjustments, I don't know, seamstress stuff," she snapped. "Who does that mop-top hippy reject think he is?" she exploded, turning to look back at the Student Union and caught a glimpse of him leaving by another way towards the Arts building. "I ought to Wicked Witch *him*," she threatened, raising her hand in a bizarre gesture.

Julia jumped, grabbed the hand and folded the fingers down. "Hecuba, NO!"

She looked at Julia, seemed to simmer down some. "Hon," she explained, wiggling silver be-ringed fingers at her. "Couldn't if I wanted to. Bound 'em, remember? *That's* why I do," she added, jabbing a finger of her free hand in the general direction Henry had taken.

"Oh," Julia mumbled, letting go. "But you won't will you?" she asked hopefully.

Hecuba gave a short laugh. "Not unless I'm willing to take the three-fold rebound. Rule number three, remember?"

"Do no harm?"

"Right. The three-fold rule makes sure of that. Call it karma if you want to, but it ain't the kind of karmic debt that you get pay in the next life. This one's pay as you go. No credit," she added with a growl. "Lucky him." She sighed, "So when and how do we give that to Nea?"

Julia grinned suddenly, remembering what was in her hands. "Well, I say we leave it on her bed. With a bow," she giggled, hugging the box to her. "I can drop it off after class. I won't be joining you guys for dinner tonight."

"What?" Hecuba exclaimed, looking at her in surprise. "Why not?"

"Cause William asked me out to dinner after practice tonight?" she said.

"On a school night?"

Julia nodded.

Hecuba sighed again. "So where are you going?"

"There's this little French place just outside of Clarkstown he wants to take me to, but it's really booked on the weekends, so the only reservations he could get were

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for tonight.”

“Montclair?” Hecuba asked, startled. Julia grinned, nodding again. Hecuba gave a low whistle. “That place ain’t cheap. Where’s he getting the money?”

Julia shrugged. “He tole me not to worry about it. I’m going to wear the dress I got for my uncle’s New Year’s party. It’s gorgeous. Gonna knock him dead!”

Hecuba tried to suppress a grin as she opened the door to the science building. “Just as long as it doesn’t knock you up.”



Nea was cutting around the back side of the math and sciences building headed for her Physics Lab. Going in through the back door was closer and less confusing than having to go up to get down to the basement class as she would have had to do if she went in the front door. As she rounded the corner, hands snagged her waist and pulled her close. She growled and spun in the grasp, raising her books but managed to stop before she clobbered him with them.

“Thomas Michael Harlan!” she snarled. “*If I were a Worker like Meme you’d be croaking right now,*” she hissed in Ojibwe as another student trotted up to the back door.

Thomas pulled her back around the corner, laughing. “*No, more like I be lying halfway across quad nurse broken bones. Or running from campus cats at six inches tall.*”

She mellowed as her heart finally slowed down and he stole a kiss. “What do you want? You’re supposed to be on your way to work,” she complained halfheartedly.

He chuckled. “Yeah, well, I’ve eked tomorrow night off. They’ve started up movie night again and I was wondering if you would go with me?”

“Movie night?” she asked.

“Oh yeah, they didn’t do it last September. When the weather’s warm enough, the Student Union does these free movies. They drop a canvas off the roof of Randal and turn the Green into one big drive in. They’re older movies of course, only ones they can get permission to do this sort of thing for, and it’s in the budget. But I hear they got some good ones this term. May be why they’ve had to wait this long: budget. Rumour has it, they’ve snagged the original Star Wars. So,” he said, slipping his hands down over her hips and pulling her closer. “Wanna go?”

“Well, I liked Empire better...” Then she purred in his ear making him laugh and pull away.

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“That tickles, kitten,” he warned.

“If it will get you to let me go long enough to get to class on time, I’d go with you to the moon,” she chuckled, kissing him. “Now get to work,” she added, pulling away.

“Oh, no fair, woman,” he groaned. “...I’ll grab us a picnic supper tomorrow then and you meet me in front of Randal with some blankets, something to lie on, cover up with...”

She grinned at him from the edge of the building. “Something to hide what you’re hands will be up to?”

“Maybe,” he denied with a blushing grin.

She disappeared around the corner and darted into the building. Her heart was pounding. How was she supposed to concentrate on physics like this? She groaned.



When Nea finally got back to her room after dinner, she found a box sitting on her bed. She froze, looked over at Gaganan who was just stretching as he came over to see what she’d brought him for dinner. “Where did that come from?” she asked.

Miss Not-Now-I-Have-A-Date-You’re-Gonna-Get-Cat-Hair-All-Over-Me. What’d you bring me?

She closed the door, setting the bits of beef down for him. “It’s not much. I can open a tin of tuna later if you like.”

He shrugged as he knelt over the food. *I’ll go hunt frogs later. Open it. Miss I-Don’t-Understand-Cat wouldn’t say,* he sniffed.

Nea set her things down and opened the box. He glanced over his shoulder as he heard the rattle of tissue paper. In her cage Lulabelle popped her head up out of her hammock at the sound.

Ooo, playstuff?

Maybe, Nea mused, staring, dumbfounded at the objects in the box. She wasn’t sure if it was underwear or a bikini. She picked the creamy white top up, felt the contradiction of the fabric, rough and soft at the same time. The inside was smooth however. The front was a simple hook that slid into a loop of fabric. A knock on the door made her jump.

Gaganan sniffed then headed over and opened the door.

Hecuba seemed startled to see who opened it, then caught a glimpse of what was in Nea’s hands and came in, closing the door behind her.

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Nea looked over at her. “Do you know anything about this?”

She just leaned back against the door and grinned.

Nea gave her an exasperated look. “Well at least tell me if it’s a bathing suit or underwear. I’m not sure. Did she give you anything like this? There’s no note. Is this her way of asking us to go somewhere with her that has a fancy pool?”

Hecuba laughed. “It’s from both of us, actually.”

“What? Why?” Nea sat down on the edge of the bed. “I’m confused.”

Hecuba crossed to her, sat on the other side of the box and handed her the bottoms, which were bikini style that fastened on the sides with the same hooks the top closed with. “It’s silk. Raw silk. And the clasps are bone.” She showed her how to take the hasps off the bottoms. “If these are uncomfortable on your hips, you can slip them off and use a ribbon instead.” She fished four of them out of the paper. “I had a friend in the theatre department make them. If they work out it shouldn’t be any hardship whatsoever to have more made.”

“But... why?” Nea breathed.

Hecuba shrugged, “Julia and I both agreed you can’t go running around leaving your skivvies to be found should you have to shift. And after what happened last term...” she frowned.

Nea suddenly hugged her. “You guys are too good to me.”

Hecuba laughed. “What are friends for? They should fit. Julia filched a set of yours for measurements.”

“Oh, so *that’s* where they vanished to!” Nea chuckled. “I was wondering. Thought I was going nuts when they just turned up in the drawer again.”

“Oh, what I came to tell you,” Hecuba added. “I was in town this morning to find props and there’s this store that has washable silk blouses for like twelve dollars. Supposedly you can just toss them into the washing machine. Thought we could go check them out, get you a few for the summer?”

Nea frowned, thinking. “Yea, but they’ll have plastic buttons.”

Hecuba grinned. “And we have a supplier who’ll be happy to make you bone replacements. They’ll even dye to match.”

“Where?”

“You worked for them over the holidays,” she chuckled.

“You’re kidding! That’s who made these hooks isn’t it?”

Hecuba nodded. “Well, put them on, see if they’re comfy. Oh, you wanna go to that store now? I think they’re open ‘til like 9.”

“Yeah, I have a few bucks to spare. This is an expense I can easily justify.”

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“I’ll go get ready, meet you in the hall.”

Nea nodded, began slipping out of her clothes, tried on her new under-things. They fit like old favourites The hasps on the hips didn’t cut in too much, and the silk gave just enough when she sat down that there was little threat of breaking the clasps. She hurriedly got dressed again and rushed out to meet Hecuba, Gaganan tagging along happily even knowing he’d have to wait outside the store.



The next day sped by. She met Thomas just after History, they ate the quick lunch she’d brought and then off to class. Thomas was fully aware they were getting nasty looks from Tolby, whom he knew was one of Jonah’s stooges. He did not call Nea’s attention to the matter. He gave her a quick kiss outside the physics building before darting off to his own lab in the science building across the street.

Nea hurried back to the dorm the minute the instructor dismissed them. She rushed to get ready. She wore one of her new silk shirts, her new under-things of course, and a pair of leather pants that laced up, hippy style. She grabbed an extra sweater in case it turned chilly. Julia came in as she was folding up her fur blanket to bring.

“Going to the movie too?” Julia drawled as she dropped her bag on her desk and got Lulabelle out of her cage.

“Yeah, Thomas is bringing dinner.”

“Ooo, I should grab something. Maybe a bucket of chicken from that place across the street?” she said playing with the excited ferret.

Nea laughed. “Bringing her with?”

Julia shook her head. “Nah, she’d be too much a distraction. Gaganan going?”

He snorted from his perch on the window. *Of course. How often do I get to watch these things?*

Nea chuckled. “You sure you’re going to ‘get it’?” she asked him, grabbing a plain wool blanket to serve as ground cover.

I watched that horror flick... what was it called... the one where the girl’s head spun around like an owl’s?

“The Exorcist?” Nea provided.

Julia, only hearing half the conversation, nevertheless gaped.

That was it. I watched that one with Newin and Tuwe on television one night at the Southbends. I didn’t understand why it was entertaining, but I ‘got it’.

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“Well, that explains the nightmares you were having,” Nea mused. “This movie is science fiction, a bit different than a horror flick.”

He also had a thing for Dr. Who, he sniffed, looking out the window at some birds flying past.

Nea just folded the blanket and set it on the bed, shaking her head. “I guess that explains why you were sneaking off nights while we lived with them.”

“I take it he’s going?” Julia surmised, rolling a ball across the floor for the ferret to chase.

The ferret was making funny noises as she herded it back towards where Julia was sitting on the floor. *oo ee ahh unh* and the like. Julia was distracted for a second by Nea’s nodding answer and Lulabelle thwacked the small tennis ball with her back end, shooting it past Julia’s hand under the bed. *Shoots! SCORES!* she screeched, began cavorting and hopping about in a ferrety imitation of an end-zone victory dance. *eee, ooo, ah ah ahah!*

Nea stifled a shriek of laughter.

“Lulabelle!” Julia growled, realizing where the ball went, glancing under the bed. “Fine, *you* go get it! Tell her to go...,” she asked, turning back to Nea and noticing her attempt to control herself. “What’s so funny?”

Like I’ve been saying. Lunatic, muttered Gaganan.

“Have you been taking her to the soccer games with you?”

“Yeah, why?” she frowned. “William adores her.”

“Cause she’s doing a fair imitation of a soccer player who just scored.”

Julia looked down at the ferret who finally stopped and looked up at her, blinking her beady little eyes.

She wants you to get the ball. It’s too far under for her, Nea explained, then looked to the window as Gaganan got up with a chirrupy growl in his throat.

Excuse me, he said, lashing his tail and pushing up on the half open window sash.

Nea lifted it the rest of the way for him, but he was already half out. She glanced down the ledge to see what had his attention. Down near the end, by Hecuba and Jenny’s window, was a large, fat squirrel chewing on an acorn while he stared into the window like it was a highly entertaining television program. Gaganan stalked down the ledge. He got within four feet before the wind shifted and the squirrel noticed him. He spooked, dropping his nut and made a kamikaze jump off the end of the ledge for the nearest tree branch. The resultant cracking, rattling and yelp from someone below pelted with acorns told that it was a less than graceful

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landing. Gaganan watched for a few serene moments, then turned to the window, placing a paw on the pane then returning to the room.

He rubbed up against his own window frame before coming back inside. *Teach that arrogant... By the way,* he added, leaping from the sill to the floor, vaulting cleanly over the bed, *you'll want to hurry. That was Thomas who just got hit by the acorn rain.*

Nea jumped into action, slipping her moccasins on and snatching up the blankets. "I gotta go. Is William coming with you?" she asked on her way to the door.

"He'll be along just as soon as practice is over," Julia nodded, putting the ferret back in her cage with a few treats. "I have to hurry myself if I want to get some take out." She pulled a folded picnic blanket out of her wardrobe. "Will you take this down with you? Save me a spot?" she asked.

"Sure, but hurry."

She laid it on top of Nea's pile and followed her out the dorm.

Thomas was waiting for them in the lobby with a picnic basket in his hands. He laughed as he followed Nea's eyes. "I borrowed it from Anang," he explained before she could ask. "Though I dare say I ought to invest in one," he added, holding the door for Nea and leaning into the crook of her neck as he followed her out. "That last picnic by the lake in Manitoba was most... delicious. I could do with a few more of those. Especially around exam time."

She scowled playfully and led him out to the Green where other people had apparently had the same idea they had, to come early. They laid out Julia's blanket next to theirs but left the fur blanket folded neatly next to them. Gaganan poked his nose into the basket.

"I think someone's already hungry," Thomas laughed, began setting out the picnic things.

The cat moved back, settling himself like a gentleman across from them and waited for dinner to be served.

While Thomas was setting out various covered dishes a young woman walked by and smiled. "Oh, what a well-behaved cat," she exclaimed. "And gorgeous too!" she said, bending to offer her fingers.

He sniffed at them, allowed her to stroke his ruff.

"Thank you," said Nea, reclining back against the folded fur.

The girl looked up with a smile, which vanished the second her eyes fell on what Nea was leaning against. "Is that... that *fur*," she gasped. "*Real* fur?" She

sounded horrified.

Nea frowned. "Yes."

"How could you?" she snarled, standing, all trace of friendliness gone. "I thought your people of all would revere them. Do you know what they put those poor creatures through, the conditions they live in? How many animals are murdered just for one coat!?"

"I can assure you," Nea responded calmly. "That each and every rabbit that went into this blanket was free range and wild before they became supper."

The woman gave a horrified squeak and stormed off with a tirade of 'filthy heathen murderer' under her breath.

Nea looked confused. "Now why was that...? Most animal rights activists mostly object to fur farms and the waste of everything else..."

Gaganan licked his paws in anticipation of supper. *She was a grazer,* he answered calmly.

A what?

You know, he said, glancing up at her. *One who doesn't eat meat. A deer. So telling her they were eaten only made it worse.*

"Vegetarian?" she offered, then corrected herself, "Vegan."

"She was?" Thomas asked, setting a covered dish in front of her. "What, he could smell it on her?" he asked, nodding his head to the cat.

"Ye...yes," she said, getting herself under control.

He shrugged. "Can't please everyone, no matter how you try."

I smell chicken, said Gaganan, nosing the plate Thomas had put in front of Nea.

She opened it and pulled a bit off the half a bird for him.

Thomas looked up as it was halfway to the cat's open mouth and jumped, gently putting her hand down. "Don't give him that!"

Nea frowned, looking at him. "Why not?"

Gaganan narrowed his eyes at him. *Yeah, why not?*

 he growled.

Thomas sat back. "I'm not sure how his stomach'll take it. It's a South American recipe Professor Jameson gave me. Might be too spicy. Besides, I brought something just for him."

The cat grumbled, twitching his whiskers as Thomas reached back into the basket. *If he opens a tin of cat food, I swear I'll bite him.*

There was a popping sound as he opened something plastic. Gaganan's nose started twitching instantly. His eyes were wide from the instant the container had

been opened and followed the small plate until it was set in front of him. He sniffed it. Nea saw that it was fish of some type, but had been more than just fried up. There was some kind of glaze on it that looked to carry through the dark flesh of the fish. Gaganan's tongue flicked out, drew a flake of the fish into his mouth. *Um... mm what's... mmm oh... I ... this is... mmmummmm. Ok, I forgive him,* he purred, settling down over the plate and savouring the succulent dish.

Nea chuckled, leaned closer to Thomas. "What is on that?"

He smiled enigmatically. "Oh, it's highly nutritious. And very sweet. Don't worry, I got it off a gourmet pet website: *The Gourmet Vet*. Veterinarian approved," he chuckled.

They ate their dinner peacefully, laughing and cuddling up with each other. Gaganan cleaned his plate and lay down to wash his face. People were starting to gather, laying out blankets to reserve the best places the moment they got out of classes. People were pulling out radios as if this were just another day on the Green. Even Thomas finally removed a small one from the bottom of the basket. "What is that for?" Nea asked.

Thomas smiled. "To hear the movie. Like at a drive-in?"

She shook her head. "Never been to a drive-in."

"Never..." He looked scandalized. "Well, I'm going to have to fix that this summer. When we go pick up my mother. You get there at like 7, just before dark and watch all night for one price. If you plan it right, you can get three movies in, four if they have a midnight showing."

"So we *are* bringing your mother to Zooneawagini?" Thomas nodded. "It'll do her a lot of good. We have excellent healers."

They turned their heads as strains of cithara and rhythmic drums reached them from a few rows back. Riti was helping her sister lay their things out, smiled when she saw Nea wave. She got Roma's attention and the two of them trotted over, greeting everybody. Riti bent to pet Gaganan who lifted his chin, turning his head to guide her fingers, purring like crazy. *Ooo, yeah, that's right there oh, nice.*

Nea chuckled as he flopped over onto his back to get his tummy scratched. Riti was happy to oblige him, giggling as he licked her hands when he could reach them. *Mmm, curry,* he commented.

"You are so spoiled," Nea laughed.

He huffed with a grin. *I prefer well ripened.*

"Watch under his arms," Nea warned as Riti's enthusiastic fingers strayed too close in that area.

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“Why?”

“Cause he’s ticklish,” Thomas provided with a grin.

“Really?” Roma asked, eyes wide. “How can he be with all that fur?”

“Watch,” Nea said with a wicked grin of her own and reached over, getting him right where he was most sensitive.

Gaganan flipped over and sprang out of reach in less than a second to the delight of the two Indian girls. He sneezed at Nea, licked his paw then sauntered off. *Spoil-sport,* he huffed.

Nea laughed, “He’ll be back later. I think he knows there’s something sweet and sticky in the basket still. He’ll be back for desert,” she explained when the girls looked worried about his running off.

Roma turned her head back towards their blanket, her ear catching strains of one of her favourite songs. She grabbed Nea’s hand and began to pull her in that direction. “Come and dance with us!” she said.

Nea protested. “Oh, I don’t know the first thing about belly dancing!”

“We’ll teach you!” Riti laughed, helping her sister.

“If we can teach Hecuba, we can teach anybody!” Roma grinned.

Nea looked back at Thomas for help but he was just grinning from ear to ear, readjusting his position to watch. “*Traitor!*” she growled in Ojibwe. He just laughed.

In spite of her clumsy beginning Nea actually started to get the hang of the basic movements, began enjoying herself laughing at her own mistakes. It was starting to get darker when they finally stopped and returned to Thomas. Nea flopped down onto the blanket beside him laying her head in his lap where he had spread the fur blanket. “Cold?” she asked him.

“No,” he said.

She suddenly realized what he was suggesting and she felt a bit of heat on her cheeks that had nothing to do with recent exertion. “Like that did you?”

“Oh yeah, you should do it all the time,” he deadpanned.

Julia walked up carrying a bucket of fried chicken and two boxes of sides. She was staring a few yards away at something. She snuck a biscuit out of one of the boxes, still staring. Finally, she pointed at a silvery long-haired tabby who was cuddling up to Gaganan several blankets away. “Isn’t that the ragdoll from down the hall?” she asked, setting the food down.

Nea glanced over. “I think you’re right.”

“Whoever she is she is very attractive,” Riti said, admiring the cat.

“He certainly likes her,” giggled Roma.

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Thomas grinned. “Hey, it *is* Spring.”

Nea laughed, quoted Gaganan’s favourite saying with a roll of her eyes, “There’ll be kittens by June!”

Everyone laughed.

Hecuba came up, dropped onto Julia’s spread, smiled at the sisters. “I just saw Jonah leaving campus,” Hecuba said. “In something of a hurry, too. I wonder where he was off to,” she frowned, making it clear she was suspicious.

“We’ve been wondering that ourselves,” sighed Roma. “He leaves every Friday at 7:30 and doesn’t come back until 9:00 or 10:00 on Sunday. We think he may have a girl out of town.”

“Or goes home,” injected Riti. Her sister frowned, she scowled back. “He’s too surly and sad these days to have a girl,” she explained. It was clear this was a long standing argument between the two. “That last one burned him bad.”

Nea shook her head. “He’s got med school coming up, he shouldn’t be thinking about women.”

“Don’t know,” Thomas shrugged, leaning back on his hands. “I hear sex is a great stress reducer,” he said casually.

Nea scowled up at him. “I wouldn’t know.”

Julia piped up, “I think worrying whether or not you’re getting any would be more stressful.”

William snuck up behind Julia, snatching her around the waist and kissing whatever he could get a hold of.

“You’re wet!” she shrieked.

“Yeah, just took a shower.” She hit him in the face with a pigtail as she squealed and struggled, laughing. As he let go and blinked hair out of his eyes he saw something, commented, “Someone’s going to get a nasty surprise. Looks like that dog’s looking to pee on someone’s blanket.”

Roma followed his gaze and pushed her sister in that direction, “Or eat their dinner! Riti run!” she shrieked. The two excused themselves and darted off. The dog, a collarless stray from the look of it, took off at the sight of them bearing down on him waving their arms and yelling.

“I hope they get there in time,” Hecuba muttered, trying not to giggle.

William threw himself down on the blanket, groaning. “Oh God, I hope there is something to that saying about bad practice-good game.”

Hecuba grinned. “Actually it’s bad *rehearsal* good *show*.”

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“Whatever,” he growled, sitting back up and opening the bucket. “We’ve got a new forward who’s my goalie replacement, and he kept screwing up. One mistake after another. Bad temper about it too. I predict a yellow card before halftime and a red before the end of the game,” he snarled, and tore into a chicken leg.

Julia pulled him back against her and began fussing over him.

“This is good, thanks, pet,” he managed between bites.

“Surprised you have much of an appetite after what I saw through my class window,” chuckled Henry as he joined them, setting his bag next to him on the edge of the blanket. “You got room for your roomie, Thom? Or is this a couples-only blanket?”

Hecuba glared at him. “That’s ok, I’m going to watch with Riti and Roma anyway. See if they have any of that curry chicken salad,” she huffed and stormed off.

Henry moved into her spot. “Geeze! What is *with* her? That woman is a bitch with a capital W,” he snapped, watching her over his shoulder.

Nea winced. “She is really nice. You just met her on a bad day.”

“A bad day that lasted a whole month?”

“You kinda compounded it, you know,” Julia accused, turning on a mini camp lamp so she could find the food easier in the growing darkness.

Henry looked to Thomas for support.

Thomas just shrugged. “Hey, I spent a whole week with her and didn’t come home croaking.”

Henry glanced back over his shoulder to where he thought she went, but could not distinguish much.

Thomas suddenly remembered something, turned to Nea and asked her in Ojibwe so they wouldn’t be overheard. “*Say, Henry is going camping tomorrow to do a photo shoot for class up in the mountains. Want to spend the weekend?*” he murmured into her hair.

She grinned. “*Leave your window open.*”

Any further comments were axed by several hundred radios of various qualities suddenly blaring the 20th Century Fox drums and trumpets. All attention turned to the side of Randal hall as golden words scrolled upwards. Gaganan crept between them and curled up where he could lean against both Thomas and Nea and get the best vantage point to watch the movie.

You two have fun? Nea purred, grinning.

Shush, I’m trying to read, he said with an irritated flick of his tail.

Nea chuckled and scratched his ear.

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Jonah stormed across the cellar floor to the long worktable that flanked the far wall, towards the bent figure working on it.

“Bad day or bad week, Raduka?” the Master asked mildly.

“Yes,” he snarled, throwing himself onto a stool near where his Master worked, peered at his work.

“Not woman troubles, certainly?”

“Only one woman troubles me, Master, and that will soon be rectified. How soon will you be done with those?”

The Master did not answer for a moment, applying a last tap to complete the design he was putting on the half inch wide strip of silver. When he laid aside his tools and slid the strip to Jonah he answered him. “Now.”

Jonah picked it up, admiring the gleaming metal in his hand. “Awfully thin, aren’t they?” he sneered.

“That won’t matter. It’s the magic that keeps them on. They are pure silver so I had to make them thin. Couldn’t get much without suspicion.”

He turned it over. “How do I put it on her?”

The Master took it from him and placed it gently into a long thin box where another identical band lay. “Since they are pure they are very soft. They will bend with ease. Just meet the ends around her wrist and only you will be able to take them off. That is part of what I’ve put into them.”

“And what else have you worked into their luminous maze?” Jonah asked suspiciously.

The Master just chuckled. “Command. I will show you later how they work. But basically, you will her to move and she will. Command them to cling to one another and no better manacles were ever wrought by man,” he chuckled.

“At least something’s gone right this week,” Jonah sighed, stretching. “Is the room ready yet?”

“Almost. And... Oh, yes, the last of the supplies for the circle came in. You can get to work now.” There was a malicious sparkle in the Master’s eye.

Jonah sat up, incensed. “Me? Why me?”

The Master waved a hand dismissively, getting up from his own seat with an exaggerated creak and groan of pain. “Old knees, hard floor, bad back,” he said. “Young knees, young back, works fast. You can do it in one month. I’ve been

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reading the book a bit. Certain parts must be scribed at certain moons. It's not neat but you'll have to slip up here during the week once or twice. Nights'll be fine. I'll give you the calendar later. What you need is in the cabinet. I'd suggest you get started."

"What am I to do about school?" he snapped. "I have finals coming up. Important finals!"

The Master smiled. "I have those answers too, Raduka. You will pass, do not worry. I hope you've been studying that book like I told you," he added as he headed up stairs.

Jonah glared after him, "Oh, I have, old man," he mumbled under his breath. "Much to your regret."

It was nearly midnight when his phone rang. Jonah was on the floor on hands and knees chalking the main outline of a circled pentagram for the Crucible. He growled, sat back on his heels. He was irritated but privately glad for the break. "What?" he snapped into the phone. "Oh, hello Bill," he said changing his tone immediately. His voice went soft and silky. "What news?" He listened. "Really," he restrained himself from showing the anger he felt. His teeth felt locked together as he listened. "Do you think they are sleeping together? ...Are you certain? ...She said that did she? But they are close. Yes, thank you. You have earned your money. Enjoy it. Were the reservations satisfactory? Good, I'm glad. Keep your ears out and keep me informed. Let me know if you think they might be intimate. No, it is none of your business why. In fact why don't you just forget we talked?" he suggested with silky ease, made a few subtle gestures with his hand. "Good-bye, Bill. Oh, and good luck tomorrow."



Nea was sitting near the rhododendron, studying, when Handsome trotted up to say hello. She set her book down, scratched his ears, while looking around for Jenny. She was talking with a young man who seemed to be upset, trying to keep him calm and an eye on Handsome at the same time. Nea waved. Jenny untangled herself for a moment and trotted over. She looked harassed. "You going to be out here for a bit?" she asked.

Nea nodded. "At least another hour unless it turns cold, then I'll go in. Why?"

She sighed. "Andrew is my lab partner for Chem and insists we have a problem with our experiment, something about a contaminant. I'm not buying it, but could

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you watch Handsome for me for about half an hour? I'd take him up to the room but he hasn't ...well, it takes him a while these days and... it takes even longer to get him upstairs and Andrew says this won't wait."

"Tell you what, if you're not back when I go in, I'll take him upstairs for you. If Hecuba is home I'll leave him there."

She shook her head. "She's not home. Dress rehearsals. They open Friday."

"I'll take him to my room then, you can just pick him up there. Take your time."

She blew in relief. "You are a life saver, Nea."

She just laughed. "I love animals."

Jenny stooped to ruffle Handsome's ears with both hands, gave him a kiss, tipped her head back so his tongue only hit her chin not her face, said goodbye and that she'd be back, and ran off with Andrew hurrying her.

How's life, old man? Nea asked as the dog groaned as he lay down beside her.

Tiring. I don't know if I can take much more of those stairs. They get taller every day.

She rubbed his side. *It happens. She take you to a vet about that arthritis yet?*

He groaned louder this time. *Yeah, I think he said there wasn't much he could do that wouldn't give me a belly ache. ...I think she's going to leave me home next year,* he said hesitantly.

Nea noted a hint of fear and sadness at that. *Is that what you want?*

The old poodle rolled over to face her, sighed. After a moment's thought he said, *On the one hand I do, stairs hurt. But... I don't think I've got all that much time left and I don't want to be away from her when it happens. I don't mind going, mind you. I've been with her a very long time but... I kinda want to be with her til the end, you know? Is that wrong?*

Nea bent and set her forehead to the dog's forehead, *No,* she smiled. *It's not. I'll... I'll talk to her. Maybe she can ask for a first floor room next year?*

That'd be nice, he sighed, giving her a lick. *Oh, thank that cat of yours for me. That squirrel hasn't been back since.*

Nea sat back against the tree. *Oh, I had something to do with that too. I had a few words with him last night. He's now absolutely terrified to walk that sill,* she chuckled.

Jenny didn't show back up for almost two hours. Nea had left the green, even carried Handsome upstairs. He was curled up on Nea's bed next to Gaganan who was licking his face when Jenny knocked on the door. Nea let her in.

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“Now that’s a sight you don’t see everyday,” she chuckled. “I’m so sorry it took so long. But you said to take my time so I didn’t worry too much.” She crossed to the dog who had sat up to greet her. “How are you boy? You have fun? Again, I apologize,” she added over her shoulder. “Somehow one of our samples had gotten contaminated. We had to sort out the contaminant. Seems the whole supply of that chemical was dirty. Got salts in it somehow. I suspect the prof’s testing us, but... Andrew panicked. Took us a bit longer to run the new specs to find the error.”

Nea dismissed it. “Not a problem. He was an angel. Say Jenny, I’ve heard that Mr. Mooreland has authorization to continue the experiment a few more terms. Going to add two more dorms to the equation. You going to bring him back with you next year?”

Jenny sighed, suddenly depressed yet relieved to have it out in the open. She dropped into Julia’s chair. “I want to... but... he’s getting old. I’ve had him since I was a baby, ...actually, I think he’s a few months older than I am,” she chuckled, as the dog relocated to her lap. “And the stairs...”

Nea nodded. “I’ve noticed. But I was thinking maybe with the extra dorms there’s a greater chance of you getting a ground floor room, especially,” she added, “if you ask Mike now and explain to him why. It’d be terrible for you to be away at school when he dies.”

“Yeah, I know. But I have to think what’s best for him,” she protested. “Much as I hate it.”

“You’ve been together for nineteen-twenty years. It’d be devastating to him at this point to be separated from you. Might even leave him depressed, which could hurry the end. I’d talk to Mike. What can it hurt?”

Jenny wiped her eyes. “Yeah, you’re right. I’ll see about that. Thanks. And thanks for watching him.” She picked him up when she stood, headed for the door. She looked back, “You know, I think you would have made a dynamite roommate. But I think we did the right thing, keeping those two apart at first. Did you know they’re actually hanging out together now? It’s the weirdest thing,” she chuckled.

Nea laughed. “Tell me about it!”

CHAPTER NINETEEN:

The Play's The Thing

Nea and Julia double dated to the play that was Hecuba's final for one of her classes. They had steered clear of her for the last couple days as she was running around like a maniac trying to make sure everything was perfect. Thomas and William had met their respective women at the foot of the stairs, flowers in hand. William had a bouquet of red roses and white chrysanthemums and Thomas held only a single snow white camellia.

"You sure Nea's not going to feel bad me giving Julia all this and her only get that one little thing?" William asked. His offer to spring for a second bunch had been politely refused, much to his confusion.

Thomas just rocked on his heels grinning like a bobcat. "Nope. I'd be in more trouble if I bought her roses."

William just shook his head. He didn't have time to ask why as the door on the third floor opened and Julia's giggling chatter could be heard on the landing.

Julia squealed when she saw the bouquet, throwing her arms around his neck. Nea received hers with a great deal more grace, allowing Thomas to fix it into her hair. The kiss she gave him for it though was a great deal more passionate. Arm in arm they strolled through the gloaming to the theatre building.

As they stood outside the doors waiting admittance, Nea frowned to see the poster. It was clearly based on the picture Julia had drawn for her. "What the...?" she began, setting a fist on her hip.

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Thomas looked up, had to peer twice, then frowned as he thought he recognized certain features. "Is that Gaganan?" he asked.

Julia blushed immediately. "It was her idea," she said quickly.

The play's title was Goonagini. Snow Rose.

"It's really good," Julia continued in a begging voice. "You'll like it, I promise."

Nea narrowed her eyes. "You've seen it already?"

"Dress rehearsal," she confessed. "Had to make shore everythin' worked right."

"She let you see it but not me?"

Julia nodded meekly.

She wanted it to be a surprise, said Gaganan.

Nea turned to see the cat sitting by the steps, blinking up at her.

You knew? she rumbled.

He licked his paw serenely, ran it over his cheek. *Yup.*

Going to sneak in? she added.

He just gave her a single chuckle. *Nope. I've got the best seat in the house. See you inside,* he purred and wandered away.

"I *was* the designer. That's why I could see it. She didn't want you to know until tonight," Julia said with a plea in her voice.

Nea growled good-naturedly. "All right, I'll wait until after I've seen it to strangle the both of you."

William piped up, asking a bit louder than was quite necessary in an effort to ward off what he thought might be an argument. "Are you guys going to do what you did last semester? With the study room for finals?"

"Already booked. Tuesday next week," Julia said, hugging William's arm as they finally moved inside. "And yes, there will be more brownies."

"You are welcome to join us if you like," Thomas added with a grin.

As they took their seats, Nea kept looking around for signs of Gaganan, wondering where his 'best seat in the house' was. By the time the lights dimmed she had not found him and gave up, snuggled in closer to Thomas to watch.

The curtain opened on a forest. There were a few maché trees and a painted backdrop that stood only a yard or so back from the curtain. Suddenly a butterfly danced across the stage on a string, flitting about idly. Then came the cat. Gaganan pranced out onto the stage, darting after the butterfly and cavorting like a kitten. Nea gasped. Gaganan, catching her eye just winked at her. Thomas chuckled. William leaned over to Nea, whispered, "Isn't that your cat?"

A woman walked out onto the stage in native dress, sat down against one of

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the trees and set her bundle of firewood down. She sighed, noticed the cat and smiled, watching him play for a moment. She sighed again and he looked at her. Smiling, she pulled a tidbit out of her pouch and offered it to him. "Come, little forest spirit," she said. "You have made me laugh, though you make me sad. I will share my lunch with you."

Gaganan crossed to her, accepted the bit and allowed her to pet him. The woman, as she looked out at the audience and the spotlight came to rest on her was scarred and unattractive. A voice filled the theatre. "You have been kind to me, Spotted Woman," it said. "Tell me what troubles you."

The woman gasped, began to address the cat as if it were he who had spoken. She told him how she longed for a child, a daughter, but she wanted her to be beautiful, not like her mother; so beautiful that the greatest warriors would desire her for a wife. But because she was so ugly, no man would have her for a husband, so she had no hope of a child. The lights dimmed and flickered a moment and when they came on again, where the cat had been stood a white skinned man with a black vest and pants, black hair. "Then be my wife for a moon, and I promise you a child so beautiful even the sun shall want her for wife."

The story spun on from there. Basically, it was the story of sleeping beauty with a First Nation bent. The woman returned to her tribe, had the baby and raised her, a beautiful girl with white skin and lips like the petals of the season's first rose and so they named her Snow Rose: Goonagini. When she came of age an evil shaman from another tribe came to ask for her hand and was refused. In punishment the girl was turned to stone. Gaganan crossed the stage again, nuzzled the woman weeping beside the stone figure (which was the actress with a grey cloth draped over her to represent the stone) and the voice over the speaker spoke again, telling her to place the statue of her daughter in a protected place in the woods and leave her there, that he would take care of her. When she did so and left, he again became the man (this time with a puff of smoke) and the costumed man called forth other animals, men and women in fantastic costumes and set them to the tasks of either guarding the sleeping Goonagini or searching the world for a man worthy of her and leading him to her.

The animals found such a man, lead him through various tricks to the mountainside where he found an old woman who told him the story. He went off stage, blinded by the tales of the maiden's beauty, intent on being the one to rescue her. The sorcerer returned, angered to discover his work about to be undone and changed his own form. The final scene took place at the very back of the stage,

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where a grotto had been built and the maiden of stone lay upon a stone platform, guarded by an enormous Papier-mâché dragon made in the style of the Chinese dragons seen at Chinese New Year parades, though it looked far more like Uktena to Nea. Gaganan lay on the platform at the 'stone' maiden's feet, supposedly sleeping. The beast coiled around the hero fighting tooth and knife but no where the hero stabbed seemed to help. Finally the cat sat up watching the fight and the voice called out "The seventh spot from its head hides its heart". The hero stabbed the knife in and pulled it out with a long red streamer to represent the blood and the dragon fell limp. The hero cut the 'beast' open, peeling away the first part of the costume to reveal the sorcerer lying dead, then turned to the platform.

The hero wept over the stone figure and Gaganan walked off, hopping off the back and slinking off-stage, the cloth cleverly tied to him and slipping away after him. The girl sat up, kissed her hero and the curtain dropped. The butterfly again fluttered across the stage, with the cat hot after it. In the centre stage it dropped low enough and he pounced on it, grabbed it in his mouth and trotted proudly off the stage to the roar of applause and laughter.

The four of them were invited to the after party. Gaganan sat primly beside Hecuba on a table accepting the coos and admiration and treats of the cast and crew as they passed by him. After the round of hugs for Hecuba, Nea strolled over to the 'cat of the hour'. The actress who had played Goonagini was complaining with a broad smile on her face to a friend as she stroked the cat. "Well, you know what they say, 'never work with children or animals'," she laughed. "They always up-stage you." When Hecuba introduced Nea, she began gushing about Gaganan. "Oh, he *is such a darling!*" the girl exclaimed. "I am so glad you let us borrow him!"

Nea smiled, gave his cheek ruff a tweak. "Oh, happy to let out the inner ham," she said. "How could I refuse?" *Been bitten by the acting bug?* she purred, nose to nose.

He just grinned. *What? And end up like old Gus with a shake to my paws and going on about Fireforfiddles and my youth on stage? Thanks, but I'll stick to chatting up spirits,* he said, giving her nose a lick then climbing into her arms.

She held him like a toddler, he was certainly big enough, and stared at him blankly. The actress had wandered off with her friend and Nea leaned into Hecuba. "Did he just reference Cats?" she gaped.

Hecuba laughed. "Like I would know?"

"I think he did!"

What, is that so hard to believe? he chuckled.

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“Anybody been playing the record around here?” Nea continued trying to get to the bottom of the matter. “Cause I’ve never seen it or played it.”

*University *is* supposed to broaden one’s horizons, isn’t it,* he said with a raised brow. He stuck his nose in the camellia over her ear, breathing deep. *And actually, I found a copy of Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats back in the dressing room. I’ve been reading it on the sneak.*

She ruffled his head. “Too clever for your own good, you know.”

“He was marvellous,” Hecuba said loudly as others began to mingle closer. “He was remarkably easy to work with. Didn’t take much to get him to do what we needed. Except for the day someone decided to use salmon treats. Took multiple repeats,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

On her shoulder, Gaganan just chuckled and began licking his paws. *Mmmm, Pounce.*

“Explains why he hasn’t had too much of an appetite last few days,” Nea chuckled.

Hecuba laughed quietly. “Would you believe I actually have an expense labelled ‘Pounce Fund?’”

“Oh, I believe it.”

“We’ll only need him a couple more nights. We wrap Sunday. As his owner, you’re welcome to come to the wrap party,” Hecuba said as they wandered through the crowd.

“I just might. Give me a break from studying. Though I have a report I *have* to finish by Monday,” Nea groaned. *So Raven will just have to cool his tail feathers for the next couple,* she purred to Gaganan. *I’ll make up for it when we get to the mountain.*

Thought you weren’t supposed to go back until you were done here?

he asked.

Kinda have to if Thomas wants to initiate marriage, you know.

Oh yeah.

If you’d been around more you’d know that, she added with a tweak.



The next couple of weeks were a whirlwind of activity. Julia and Hecuba had rented a storage unit so they could store their more cumbersome belongings like Julia’s computer and Hecuba’s altar/apothecary. Not to mention her loft.

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Hecuba came over to Julia and Nea's room to borrow her printer to print up her report. While they waited on it, they talked about returning to Randall the next year.

Hecuba sat on Julia's bed, feet tucked up under her while she watched Lulabelle playing soccer on the floor with Gaganan. William had heard about this and made a mini net for her. "Well, you and I can move back here but Nea and Thomas will technically be married by that time. They'll either move into married housing or rent an apartment."

Nea mused from the book she was reading, "Married housing isn't part of the experiment, and they aren't opening the whole campus to pets yet. We can't live in married housing, not if I want to keep Gaganan with me."

Julia shrugged, "So, we look for a house."

Hecuba scowled at her. "You're assuming they want to share housing their first year of marriage. They *might* want to be alone you know."

Lulabelle scored and began her victory dance, apparently her favourite part of the game. Gaganan just sat behind the net and washed his paws.

Nea closed her book, unable to absorb another fact from the dry history book. "We can't afford a place on our own. We'll have to share. Henry's already been talking about it," she sighed. She saw Hecuba roll her eyes. "He's a nice guy. Give him a chance. He'd be in the dark room half the time anyway, I hear. But I was saying there's this house off Southgate Parkway. It's an old Victorian house, two stories plus basement and attic. The yard is miniscule but it has a tree for climbing," she said, glancing at the cat who reached out and stopped another goal, batting it to the door. "It needs a *lot* of work but Henry said he might be able to use that to get the owner to lower the rent a bit ...if we do some of the repair work. It has four bedrooms, two up, two down, and the basement used to be a doctor's office, so it's been converted already. Henry said he'd take the basement. It has a good place to set up a dark room. Put some distance between you two. There's even an attic room with a skylight that might be an excellent place for your ritual space..." she enticed.

Hecuba twitched, sorely tempted.

"We just have to make up our minds before we leave for the summer," she added.

Hecuba sighed. "I'll go by and take a look before the study group tomorrow. He say how much it'll be a month?"

Nea shook her head. "Negotiating's still to be done. But I think it might be reasonable. I believe he was charging like \$2300 month to the doctor that used to

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live there. But that may be flexible considering the condition.”

Julia perked up. “That’d only be about four and a half bills a piece. I think even Thomas can manage that. It’s less than the dorms at any rate and there wouldn’t be all this moving every summer.”

“And we can stay throughout the summer if we want to take summer courses,” Nea added. “Which I intend to do next year.”

“How come you’re not doing it this year?” Julia asked.

Nea just looked at her. Hecuba reached over and popped her shoulder. “Hello,” Hecuba growled. “The marrying thing?”

“Oh, right!” she exclaimed. “Gotta go home for that!” she said pulling the last of the paper from the printer tray. “Um, so if everybody agrees... when will you ‘do it right?’” she grinned.

Nea shrugged. “Maybe next spring. The *other* reason we can’t do married housing. We kind of need to live together more than a season.”

“I thought he had to live with your folks?” Julia mumbled as she handed Hecuba the report.

“Anang said she’d ‘keep an eye on them,’” Hecuba grinned. “She’s going to stand for them tribally speaking. Feels responsible for getting them together.”

“Nah, she was just his florist,” Nea laughed. She stood, began taking off anything which wasn’t natural, which included the ring Hecuba had given her. This she placed carefully on her desk. “Listen, I’m going to go prowl campus, pounce on Thomas on his way back from work. I’ll see you two later.”

Hecuba grinned as Nea arched and twisted and shrank to the small grey and white cat form she preferred. “Have fun.”

Gaganan came over, nosing her. *I’ll walk you out. I want to pay someone a visit anyway.*

She just rolled her eyes at him and followed him up onto the window sill and out onto the ledge.

He led her to the oak tree that he used to get down to the ground floor and the two of them strolled off across the Green in different directions. Nea cut across at a diagonal, pausing frequently to take in the interesting scents she kept finding. She had a little while yet before Thomas would be leaving work. She played tag with a couple of squirrels though it took a bit to get them to realize who she was and that she wasn’t hunting. The smaller of the two actually remembered her, which was surprising. When it got too dark they headed for their nests and she wandered off towards the Student Union and the Cafeteria.

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When she passed the parking lot, she walked the narrow wall that rose up on the high side of the 'parking pit' as some of the frat boys had dubbed it. There were people parking or leaving, but two of them caught her eye. With her feline eyes it was easy to pick out Jonah getting out of his car, met by the fatter of his two friends. She tuned her ears in but could not manage to hear what they were saying, the wind through the pit was causing interference. Her keen eyes, however saw Jonah hand him a small object which Coleman put in his pocket. The two of them walked off with Jonah apparently giving detailed instructions.

Suspicious, she started to follow, but the bells from the church began to toll 9 o'clock and she ran for the cafeteria. As she rounded the corner she saw Thomas dropping a bag of trash in the dumpster on his way out the door. He paused to wave at someone inside calling out a good evening and walked off. Nea waited until he got closer before she pounced out of the darkness, leaping up into his arms.

He jumped, startled, but caught her instinctively. He looked deep in her eyes, holding her back just a bit. "Silver?" he asked. She blinked, purring, licked his chin, rubbing her head against his hand and whatever she could reach. He laughed. "Ok, ok, I get it. I love you too, pet." He tucked her into a more comfortable position, carried her towards the dorms. "But you can't stay with me," he sighed. "I wish you could, but you can't. Henry..."

He was interrupted by a sneering voice. "New girlfriend?"

He looked up. Nea hissed. Tolby was leaning against the side of the bookstore with a grin. Inside the lights were going out row by row. "Yes..." Thomas answered, recovering. "For my girlfriend's cat."

Nice save, she purred, even knowing he couldn't understand.

He held her protectively.

Tolby dropped the smile. "I would watch it with that in'jun girl, Hardluck" he warned. "They aren't known for their fidelity. Like as not she'll run off with one of her own when she tires of you. Or with someone darker skinned than herself. Happened to my brother."

"Think maybe your attitude might have had something to do with that?" said Joseph. Thomas turned and saw Redbird leaving the student union building with several books in his arms.

"Stay out of this, Squanto," Tolby sneered.

"Hey, Thomas," Joseph said never taking his eyes off the lanky red-head, "how would you like a red scalp for your birthday?"

Tolby paled. Nea's ears perked up. Thomas stroked her fur to calm himself.

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“His?” he sneered. “Nah, I’d be afraid of what was nesting there.”

Before anyone else could retort, someone came out of the bookstore, locking up. She was a pretty blond, maybe in her mid to late twenties but still a knock-out. She looked up, startled to see someone other than Tolby there and to feel the hostility in the air. “Um, is there a problem? I’m sorry but I just closed up,” she said in a very polite voice.

“No, Meridith,” Tolby said, offering her his arm. “None at all. I’ll walk you to your car.”

Joseph, Thomas and Nea watched them go. “That Silver?” Joe asked quietly without looking at the cat. Nea answered with a meow. He nodded. “What did I interrupt?”

Thomas shook his head. “The usual,” he said, turning back towards the quad and starting to walk. Joseph walked with him. “What were you doing at the union this late?”

“Tutoring. Making a few extra. Get a lot of call for that this time of year.” Joseph reached out and gave Nea a scratch behind the ears. “So I hear you and Henry are looking at ol’ Doc Henson’s place.”

Thomas nodded. “Henry’s trying to negotiate a deal. I’m trying to get the girls interested. We’d have the room. The more people the lower the rent.”

He nodded. “Well, you two need anything, you know where to find us,” he said, veering off towards his own home as Thomas carried Nea back to Randall. She complained vociferously.

“Hey, you need some sleep, kitten. See,” he pointed up on the third floor ledge at the cat waiting patiently for her, “Gaganan agrees. You have a physics test tomorrow.”

She sighed, nuzzled him, not wanting to remove her head from the crook of his neck. He kissed her and set her down, watched as she darted up the tree and leapt for the ledge.

Thomas watched until she disappeared into her window before turning back toward Cather.



The next day was hectic for everybody. Nea struggled through her physics test, swearing she’d never take the subject or anything like it again. Thomas didn’t have a test that day, but worked a shift and a half to make up for the days he would. Henry

was in the dark room all morning trying to finish up his photo presentation. Julia actually found time after one of her tests to make a ton of brownies and still go with Nea to get a cooler full of milk and coffee drinks. They passed Jonah on their way back from the store, but he merely stepped out of their way without any acknowledgement whatsoever, in spite of their obvious struggle with the laden cooler. Joseph saw them out the window and had the students he was tutoring take a five minute break so he could go down and help them. They were very relieved to let him take the whole thing. Julia showed him which room upstairs they were headed to.

“You didn’t have to do that, you know,” Nea smiled.

He shrugged. “I saw you from the window. I’m just across the hall anyway,” he answered as Julia began informing the current residents that their time was up in five minutes.

“You need anything,” he continued, “you holler.”

“Sure,” Nea said, plunging her hand into the cooler and fishing out a bottled coffee drink. “Here’s your tip.”

He laughed, “Thanks. I’ll stop by when I’m done over there.”

The two of them got set up as the previous residents filed their way out. Julia had only just set out the brownies when Thomas showed up, followed shortly by the other two men. Hecuba was the last to arrive. Henry stood up, made an exaggerated show of ‘getting out of her seat’. When she sat, he slid the whole brownie stack in front of her as an added precaution. She just glared at him, not certain what to make of it.

“I am not in one of *those* moods, if that is what you are thinking... yet,” she added, her eyes narrowed. She took one off the top of the stack, set it on a napkin and pushed the plate back to the middle of the table and pulled out her Chemistry book. “By the way, for those of you who are interested,” she began, not looking up. She paused, waiting until she was sure she had their attention. “Yes. I am interested in the house.”

Henry looked over at her, wary. “The basement is mine,” he said quickly. “I need a dark room, so you won’t have a ‘dungeon’ to play in.”

She turned her head slowly towards him, gazed sideways at him. Her face was expressionless. “Don’t worry. I prefer airy towers to rank dungeons. The attic is mine.”

Henry nodded. “Fine then. Opposite ends of the house. I think I can live with that... so long as you don’t use a caldron to cook the soup.”

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Nea noticed the ghost of a grin on Hecuba's face as she studied Henry.

"I'll try to save that for special occasions," she quipped, turned back to her book.

"I'll talk to Mr. Morgan tomorrow right after class," Henry said. "We'd all probably have to go in to sign the lease, but I think we can do that one at a time, as convenient. I'll let you know." Everyone nodded, except for William, who wasn't involved.

"How'd your test go this morning, Nea?" Julia asked, plopping down on the floor next to Hecuba with her chemistry notes on the coffee table.

Nea leaned her head back against the couch. "Miserable. But I think I passed it." She looked at Thomas. "Didn't you have one yesterday?"

"Two. But one of them was with Professor Jameson, so I did more than all right."

She grinned. "Really? Did Tuwe's advice help?" she asked.

He laughed. "You remember he introduced me to that Nisga'a? Gibu'u?"

"Yes. You two spent hours together," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Well, the Professor put an essay question on the test, like 30% of the grade. It was to pick a tribe and discuss the cultural ramifications of white man's laws on the tribal cultures," he chuckled. "I did like two pages front and back on the laws against the Potlatch and the Nisga'a's rites of ownership of land, their inheritance practices? I was still writing when he called time."

"Good. I'm glad your time was put to good use," she said, flipping through her history book.

William noted the spine on the book. "You got Forsyth for History?"

Nea looked up. "Yes, why?"

He nodded. "Did you take good notes?"

"Fairly," she shrugged. "Again, why?"

"Study from them," he advised. "He likes to throw things he mentioned in the lecture at you, stuff not necessarily in the book. He's fun, but throws wicked curve balls for tests."

"Thanks. And yes, I seem to remember that from the last one. But he hinted there might be an essay question too."

He grinned. "Well, I had him for two different classes. He's very likely to ask about enlightened despots for the essay. He also has a thing for Catherine the Great, so if you want a little extra bias in your favour..." he winked.

"Sweet!" she exclaimed, and began flipping through the book to the section on

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Tsarist Russia and consulting her notes on the subject. “Thank you.”

About an hour later, Hecuba growled and had to resist the urge to throw her Chemistry book.

Julia sighed, “I don’t get it either,” she drawled, sinking her teeth morosely into a brownie. “What we doin’ wrong?” she said with her mouth full.

Henry looked over. “What’s the issue?” he sighed.

“Moles,” Julia muttered.

“This,” Hecuba growled, pointing to a problem in her notes, then to one on an old homework assignment. “Why can’t I get mine to look like that?”

He frowned over it for a moment. “Well, it looks like you’re forgetting bonding properties. Here,” he began and started to show her where the error was.

Nea and Thomas just grinned, watching the two of them actually getting along. Under the couch, Gaganan lifted his nose, tasting the air. He chuckled. *Oh, yea. Won’t be long.* He slipped out from under the couch, keeping a wary eye on William, and filched a brownie for himself, darting back under the couch with it. *Slip me some of that frappe-whatever,* he asked Nea.

No.

Why not? It smells delicious! he growled.

Caffeine, she said, pouring him a bit of milk into the finger-bowl she’d slipped under there earlier.

Spoil-sport, he grumbled. *Hey, you might need this,* he said, pushing a couple pages of her notes towards her where they had slipped under the sofa. *Something about themes and happy versus unhappy endings in Vanity Fair.*

Oh, I was looking for that! she exclaimed, diving for it.

He licked the hand that picked up the papers. *Good luck sorting that bit out. Found the whole book too... dry I suppose? The story might have been interesting if the tale-teller had been.*

She chuckled, ruffling his cheek fur and purred. *You didn’t have to read it, you know.*

I want to know what you know. Besides... I was bored.

By the time she sat back up, her face was a little red from hanging upside down.

Henry dashed off at six for an exam, snatching up one of the last three brownies and a bottle of iced coffee for the road. Joseph popped in a little after seven, helped Julia out with a few things, and took the last brownie before heading home. Finally, at about a quarter to eight, the rest of them called it quits.

“I think if I see another molecule, I’ll explode!” Julia groaned, leaning against

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William. "Are you ready for your last few tests?" she asked him.

"As I'll ever be. I may cram a little bit more on Thursday, right before my Psych. exam."

Nea stretched, catlike; was embarrassed when her stomach loudly rumbled. "I think I'm hungry. Cafeteria is still open if we hurry."

"Not in the mood for cafeteria food, no offence," William grumbled, apologizing to Thomas.

Thomas just laughed. "Hey, I'm not the cook. I only eat there 'cause it's cheaper and faster. Besides," he added, slipping an arm around Nea, "they close the cash register in five minutes. We'd never get packed up and down there in time."

"So what do we do about it?" Hecuba sighed. "'Cause I'm starved too. And none of us have much money."

"Pizza," said William.

They looked at him. He ticked off the reasons on his fingers. "It's cheap, easy to share, and open late. *And* I know just the place."

Drats, I can't go, Gaganan said with mock dismay.

What are you up to?

Nothing much. I think I'll go take Dolly hunting in the dorm basement.

Dolly... she that Ragdoll from upstairs?

He just purred. *Got the loveliest turn of paw.*

She ruffled his fur, rubbing the muscles over his shoulders the way he liked it.

Have fun.

You too. Don't stay out late.

Henry came back in as they were packing up. "Figured you'd still be here. What, leaving?"

"How'd it go?" Thomas asked, taking the cooler from Nea while she gathered up the books.

"Better than I expected. Heading back to the dorm?"

"Pizza," Julia said. "Wanna come?"

Hecuba eyed him. "Why'd you come back? We only had the room 'til eight."

He looked at her, "On my way and I saw the light still on. I *was* going to ask if you were going to go to the cafeteria, but yes, I'd love to. There's a little place on fifth just off campus across from the pit."

"That's where we're headed," William grinned.

"We'll drop the cooler in my trunk on the way, maybe the books too if people want. We can grab them again afterwards."

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“Sounds like a plan,” Hecuba breathed.

“Besides,” Henry added, holding the door open. “I have news about the house.”

“Already?” Nea asked.

He grinned. “I’ll fill you in over a slice.”

He wouldn’t tell them until after they had sat down and ordered. It took them a few minutes to get the toppings sorted out, but everyone finally agreed to a half and half extra large which would bring dinner down to about four bucks a piece. Only when he had his cola in hand would he tell them his news.

“Well, I ran into Mr. Morgan’s daughter after my test. She’s in my class, which is how I got clued in on the house in the first place. She was on the phone with her dad, so, I told her to tell him we were interested and then she just handed me the cell phone. We negotiated the deal right then. I stop in his office first thing tomorrow morning to look over the lease agreement and sign it if we want it.” He leaned back in his chair, grinning like a bobcat.

“And what deal might this be?” Hecuba asked shrewdly, her voice cutting through the exclamations of excitement from the others.

He looked her over a second, as if trying to decide if she was trying to deflate him or was just being business savvy. Finally he grinned. “Well, we *will* have to do some work on the place. The good news is, he’ll provide the supplies.”

“What kind of work?” Thomas asked, trying to see if it would conflict with his work and school schedule.

“There’s a little plastering, mostly painting, some sanding, that sort of thing,” he shrugged. “Minor carpentry. I can do most of that. The previous tenant, the late Dr. Henson, still has a lot of stuff there. They’re going to do an estate sale as soon as he’s done with inventory, which should be this summer. Though he said for an extra bill a month, he’ll let us go through now and tag stuff to stay, basically rent it to us furnished instead of unfurnished.”

“That’s not a bad deal,” William injected. “I used to go to Dr. Henson. In fact, he gave me my physical for soccer two years ago. He’s got a lot of nice, antique furniture, and it’s a big house. Most of the stuff you’ll want to be quit of is all the doctor’s stuff in the basement, and he can sell that to the hospital most likely. My cousin said he had this huge feather bed in the master bedroom. She used to do some light housekeeping for him, especially after he had to close his practice last year.”

“What’d he die of?” Julia asked.

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“Old age, hon. He’s been in that house, practising medicine, since the early fifties.”

“That would be cheaper,” Thomas mused. “How much he asking for a month?”

“That’s the big deal,” Henry grinned. “If we do some of the repairs, and keep the furniture he’ll go down to \$1800 a month. That’s \$360 each and everybody has a separate room... who wants one.”

“Sounds like a good deal,” Hecuba replied, sipping her drink. “It’s cheaper than the dorms. When can we move in?”

“No earlier than the first of July. If we go in this week and list the stuff we’d like to stay, sign the lease no later than Monday, he can start selling off the surplus and get contractors in to deal with the stuff we can’t do. Like plumbing and roofing and electrical, that sort of thing. Doc wasn’t able to take care of things much the last few years so there are major repairs needed, but he says by the time we get back in the fall, it’ll be move in ready. In fact, we don’t have to pay rent until the first of August.”

“Wonderful. How much does he need ahead of time?” Nea asked, mentally rifling through her bank account to see how much she could scrape together.

“First month up front, but we don’t need that until at least July. I’m going to stay over the summer to help out, make sure things are the way we want them. I’ll pick up a class or two while I’m here. So if you have any special requests, you’d better tell me now,” he grinned, moving his glass as the pizza came.

“I’ll go look at it after my morning exam tomorrow,” Julia gushed. “Pick out my room.”

Nea laughed as everybody started to pull the pizza apart. “So when is everybody leaving?”

“My plane leaves for Rome on Sunday,” Julia said, shaking red pepper flakes onto her slice.

“I’m not going anywhere.” William laughed. “I live here!” His cell phone rang. He flipped it open, looked at the caller ID and excused himself. “I’ll be right back. Minor annoyance.”

“Hecuba, you coming up to the mountain at all this summer?” Nea asked as he left the table.

She shook her head. “I’d love to, but you two might want to spend the time ... doing what you’ll be doing,” she chuckled. “I leave for Massachusetts Saturday night. How are we going to get our first month’s rent in? Mr. Morgan going to give

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us an address to mail them in separate?”

Henry shook his head, swallowing and pulling a piece of paper out of his wallet. “No. He’d like it to come in as one check. I thought we could open a household account at the bank, put our rent in there and just cut a check once a month. Maybe slip in a little extra for bills. I’m going to be sub-letting an apartment this summer from a couple guys in the photography department, so they don’t lose it. Here’s my address. Mail it to me and I’ll take care of it,” he said, handing it to Julia who was nearest. “Just copy that down and get it back to me, it’s my only copy right now.”

While they ate, they passed the address around, making sure they all had a copy. William came back, apologizing profusely.

“So what was so urgent?” Julia asked with a grin.

“Absolutely nothing,” he growled. “I told him I’d call him later tonight. So, you want me to drive you to the airport, sweetness? Keep you company until your flight?”

She beamed. “I’d love that.”

“Nea, you or Thomas need a lift to the airport? Hecuba?”

Hecuba shook her head, begging off silently because her mouth was full, gesturing that she had a ride.

“I’m driving,” Thomas said.

“Oh, that’s right, you have a car.”

“That reminds me,” Julia piped up. “When’re you and Thomas driving to the mountain?”

“Have to stop and get my mother first,” Thomas said, snagging a second slice of pizza. “She’s just west of Medicine Hat.”

“So much irony there,” Hecuba grinned.

Thomas tried to ignore the comment, blushed slightly. “We’ll probably be there a week, maybe less. When’s your last exam, kitten?”

“Friday noon.”

“Mine’s that afternoon, about three. Would you be ready to leave by five?”

“One way or another, she will be,” Julia drawled with a broad grin.

Nea just laughed, gave her a friendly glare. “I’ll be ready before the test. I don’t own much.”

“I’ll bet Gaganan will be happy not to have to spend all day in that carrier,” Hecuba chuckled.

“You have no idea what I put up with on the way here!” Nea laughed. “I swear

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the lady in front of me must have thought I had a wild cat in there.”

“If she saw him, she’d have had no doubt,” William laughed. “I’ve never seen a cat that big.”

“Maine coon. He’s about record size, but not quite,” Nea giggled. “But I get that a lot. Where do you want me to meet you?” she asked Thomas.

“What are you going to do for four hours?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Aside from lunch... I don’t know. Actually, it’s warm enough; I think I’ll go down to the lake for one last swim. See the swans, stretch my wings,” she added pointedly. “Make up for the last two weeks of neglected practice.”

“Want me to meet you at the lake or do you think you can keep track of the time?”

Nea nudged him. “I’m a native, remember? We don’t need no steinking watches,” she added with a mock Mexican accent. This got a laugh from the table.

Thomas rubbed his ribs. “Point taken. I’ll meet you in the Randal lobby at five then.”

She kissed him. “Done. I’ll be a little damp, but done.”

Henry made a show of being grossed out. “On that note, *check please!*” which got an even bigger laugh. Even Hecuba covered a smile.

CHAPTER TWENTY:

Strike

Tolby and Coleman watched Jonah pacing the main room of their suite with the phone in hand. Neither of them wanted to call attention to himself. When the phone finally rang the two of them jumped. Coleman's pencil went flying, sending him scurrying after it. Tolby's just broke.

Jonah was suddenly all calm, reining in his anger and answered it. "I do not appreciate being hung up on, Bill," he said softly. "Yes, well, the information you gained had better be worth it."

He listened for a moment, moved to a dry erase board on the wall and began to write things down as he listened. "They are, are they? Yes, that is very interesting. Did they say when they'd be leaving?... Friday afternoon, five o'clock. Not much time. What? Ignore that. When are you taking the roommate home?" He wrote Sunday down. "Did you get their test schedules? When will she be alone?" There was a long pause. He stopped writing, half sat on the small table below the board where the phone was kept. Tolby and Coleman looked up, saw the look on his face and shuddered, buried their noses in their books again. "Beautiful, well worth a dinner at Montclair," he continued finally, slipping a hand in his jacket pocket and twiddling with something there. "No, no, no, Bill, *forget* about it. I understand. I should have waited for you to call. I was merely concerned when you didn't call after eight. No, supper was a wonderful idea, but I want you to forget about talking to me, you understand? *Forget* you called."

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The short hairs on the back of Coleman's neck stood up. He ignored it, slipping off the couch onto the floor with his notes.

Jonah hung up the phone with a smile of delight. He was suddenly in a *much* better mood. He erased the board. "Tolby," he said silkily. "I will need to borrow a car."



Over the next couple of days, one by one the little group found time to drop in on Mr. Morgan to sign the lease. He seemed genuinely happy with the arrangement, though laid down some rules regarding the animals. When Nea informed him that Gaganan was an excellent ratter, didn't claw furniture and was toilet, not box trained, he relaxed a little. They agreed to keep the furniture and the linens, as well as everything in the rather well stocked kitchen, leaving the personals and the knickknacks to his discretion. Nea was certain most of them would be auctioned off over the summer. There were some valuable pieces, and since the doctor had no living kin, it all fell to Mr. Morgan who had been a close friend and the executor of his estate for years. Henry had tagged some of the doctor's stuff in the basement for himself, stuff that would be handy for a dark room.

Their tests were gruelling and though they had crammed for them Tuesday, they spent a lot of their spare time refreshing themselves. Nea and Thomas did not see much of each other the rest of the week. He took to leaving a note or other trivial gift for Nea with Doris: a wildflower, an interesting stone he'd found, a muffin from breakfast. When Nea came through the line, Doris would unobtrusively set it on her tray with a sly smile and say nothing. The three girls barely saw each other, except at meals, and even then it was sometimes one going out as the other was standing in line. At night, Julia and Nea hardly spoke to each other, either falling into bed exhausted, mentally and physically, or sitting up to long hours reading.

By the time Nea had to leave for her last exam, everything she owned was packed and standing by the door. Julia had helped her to fold and put away the linen from her bed, tucking it in-between the folds of the fur quilt bound in a roll with her other blankets. They hugged each other. Even Lulabelle insisted on her own goodbyes. Nea had a short chat with her about behaving herself, hoping she'd remember. *I'll even miss the great, purring beast,* she sulked.

Nea chuckled, translating for Gaganan. He sighed, looked away. *Tell the

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lunatic I'll... miss harassing her.* He thought a second. *And I'll play one last game of soccer with her while I wait for you to come back.*

Lulabelle screeched with excitement when she was told that and tried to leap out of Nea's arms. She just laughed. "You might want to pull out the net and ball for a bit."

Julia grinned. "It'd keep her outta my hair for an hour. I got to do a bit more reading before my history exam at one thirty. I don't think I'll get to see you again before you leave, so I'll see you in August or whenever."

Nea laughed, "Don't miss William too much," she said as she headed down the hall. Hecuba wasn't in her room, but Jenny was, trying to juggle her suitcases and Handsome's leash at the same time. Nea stopped, checked her watch. She had a few minutes to spare. "Can you manage the suitcases alone?" she asked.

Jenny looked up, startled.

The glimpse of the room beyond looked barren. Two beds were lined against the walls, one made, the other stripped. There was no trace of loft or curtained altar space. Just neat suitcases and a terrarium. Jenny followed her gaze, gave a tired smile. "We transferred everything to the storage unit last night," she explained. "Looks kinda foreign, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it does."

"You know. I think I'll even miss Princess."

They shared an awkward laugh. Then Jenny piped up, remembering. "Oh, did I tell you? I talked with Moorland. He's already got me slated for the first floor here. They usually have that wing set aside for handicapped students, but he said since my dog was technically handicapped," she chuckled, "I might get one if there's room. I could make R.A. I may even have a roommate with a wheelchair next year," she seemed excited. "I'm hoping for a deaf student though, but they'd probably end up in regular rooming."

"That's right, you're planning on working with deaf kids, aren't you?" Nea suddenly remembered. "I hope it goes well." They shook hands. Nea helped her to arrange the suitcases so she could carry them all herself, then picked up Handsome, and carried him downstairs for her. She held the door open for her, setting Handsome down on the sidewalk outside, then thread his leash around Jenny's wrist. She bent to bid Handsome goodbye who licked her cheek in gratitude.

Until the next time around, Speaker, he sighed. *And thank your lion for me. He's been thoughtful.*

She gave him a final scratch behind his curly ears and waved to Jenny before

heading off to her exam.

It wasn't as brutal as she had expected, could have been worse if Gaganan hadn't found her notes on Vanity Fair. He had made a few comments to her over it that had actually helped, at least it gave her answers an unexpected perspective which might win her points that dryly regurgitating the professor's own comments would not have. The test took her an hour and a half, and even then she was one of the first to leave.

The campus looked almost abandoned. There were students everywhere, but they were all hurrying towards one goal or another, either the next test or to their cars or the shuttles to take them to buses in town. Nea took her time strolling towards the lake. Life just beyond the bounds of campus moved about at normal pace, either ignorant of the change or uninterested. She supposed it was just another aspect of life in a college town.

Once she reached the lakeside her mood shifted a little. She spread a handkerchief out and laid in it her ring and her keys, little things that would not shift, her watch, her necklace, tying them in a little bundle that she put in the crook of a branch. A pine marten came out to watch her. *Keep that safe for me, please?* she chattered.

What's in it? she asked with a flick of her tail.

Heavy, noisy things. Nothing to eat.

For me? What's for me? If I watch? she corrected with narrowed eyes.

Nea frowned at her. *Almost human that,* she accused.

The marten twitched her nose, affected an animal shrug. *I have kits to feed.*

I'll bring you back a fish, how about that?

Her dark eyes flashed. *Oooo, deal!*

Nea turned to the lake and dove in. She spent about an hour with the swan drake, learning how to take off from the water and land. She was clumsy, but he was patient. Eventually, he had to return to his mate and Nea swam off. She glanced around, saw no one and dove under the water, shifting into an otter beneath the surface. She played for a little while, as she searched for a fish for the marten, had fun chasing it down when she found a nice fat trout. The oily scales tasted tempting against her otter tongue, reminding her that lunch had been hasty and light and that supper was looming closer. She resisted taking a bite. She told herself she could snag herself a minnow for a snack later. It still amazed her how different things tasted with different tongues. She could fully understand Gaganan's penchant for frogs.

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She slid out of the water easily, shook herself dry. Glancing around the glade and seeing no one, she hopped across to the tree where she'd left the marten, the fish firm in her teeth. At least until she shifted. The transition was smooth. She dropped the fish from her mouth into her lengthening paws as soon as the taste began to be less pleasant, was fully human by the time she stood beside the tree, handing up the fat trout for the mother marten. But the marten was not there. Unseen from a tree over, Nea heard her voice yelling, *RUN!* but it was too late.

She turned, the fish falling limply at her feet, her breath drawn to scream.

“*Sephora!*”

Nea slumped obediently.

Jonah caught her neatly in his arms, wrinkled his nose at the scent of fish on her hands. He looked her over. She was slightly damp, as if she had towelled dry. He bent his head to her face, noticed no trace of fishiness on her breath, only on her hands where human skin had handled scaly. “Very interesting,” he mused to himself. “I think I shall keep my little swan-may’s talent to myself if I can. But the damp and fish will not do.” He held her braced on one arm, waving his free hand over her. “*Nos trasarem,*” he mumbled. All fragrance, even her own, slightly musky scent vanished. Pleased, he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the trash heap of a car Tolby had procured for him.

He tucked her carefully into the back seat, covering her with a crumpled jacket, a carelessly tossed blanket and assorted trash before sliding into the driver’s seat with confidence.



Gaganan was zealously guarding his goal net, watching the ferret trying to distract him with her insane bouncing and zigzagging when the spirit zoomed past and through him. The hawk landed on the ferret with absent interest. The ferret was oblivious, pushed the ball into the net and began her taunting victory dance. Gaganan’s attention was solely on the hawk spirit before him.

The serpent has taken the Speaker.

His ears went flat, his tail stiffened. The blood in his veins became ice water.
What?

The spirit relayed what he had seen. *The sparrows are following.*

Lulabelle was bowled over as Gaganan streaked over her, charging the door. By the time she had rolled onto her feet again he had opened it and disappeared down

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the hall. There was a shout of 'BAXTER!' followed by Gaganan's mad yowling and clawing at a door near the main stairs. Lulabelle peeked out of the room, saw him trying to get in the snake's room. Frightened by his odd behaviour, she slipped back inside, ran to her cage and buried herself in the blankets in her hammock.

Hecuba was packing away the last of her clothes, except for what she would need the next morning, when she heard him. She saw the edge of his white toes with their long, needle sharp claws under the door, winced as they bit into the wood outside. She hurried over, opening the door before anyone could notice. Baxter's owner was chasing her down the other hall and gave Hecuba a dirty look or maybe it was for Gaganan, she couldn't be sure. The cat bolted into the room the second the door was opened and pushed it closed behind him, darted to the space between the desk and the wall where the spirit board had been kept. He pulled up sharply, seeing it empty.

Hecuba was already digging through a suitcase looking for it. She set the board down and got out of his way to read over his shoulder.

Nea kidnapped at lake. JJ.

Hecuba stared unbelieving. "What?"

Gaganan growled a sigh and spelled it out again. *Hawk spirit saw Roses take Nea at lake. Sparrows follow.*

She sat down on the edge of the bed stunned. "Did...did anyone... human see?"

He rolled his eyes, even though he realized she was in shock. *If saw would have stop. Used spell. She fell he grab cast another put her in car. Hawk watch whole could not stop was too fast. Said after second spell her scent vanish though she right there. Even serpent footmarks vanish.*

She groaned. "A spell to remove all traces. The police won't have a thing to go on."

Police no help no match. WE have to get her.

"We have to bring them in anyway. So he can be arrested when we get her back. If only there were some trace or evidence that she was there..."

He tilted his head, listening to the hawk beside him. *He say gave non-changing to marten in tree. Was bring her fish in thanks when snake grab.* His tail suddenly shivered as he listened, said something that might have been a curse. *Was hiding in plain sight. Saw shift.*

Hecuba's face went whiter. "That is not good." She stood, began setting certain things in motion. She got up and went down to Nea and Julia's room, searched the

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desk for something that might have Thomas's phone number on it. Julia came in as she was slamming the last empty drawer closed and turning to eye the neatly packed luggage.

"What's up?" Julia asked. "Gaganan let you in?"

"Yeah. Where does she keep Thomas's phone number?"

Julia frowned, her friend was clearly in a panic. "I know it. Why? Something happen? She collapse ag'in?"

"No. Worse. Tell me," she snapped, picking up the phone.

"6743."

Hecuba dialled the number. Julia sat down on the bed, watching her warily, not understanding what was going on, but sure she'd find out when Thomas did. Unfortunately, Thomas was not who answered the phone. "Yo, state your case!"

"Henry, where's Thomas?" she asked without preamble.

"This doesn't sound like Nea. ...Hecuba?" he said suddenly, placing the voice.

"I don't have time for this, fuzzy. Where is Thomas?" she insisted, her tone pained.

"Exam. He's in the... Williams building, I think. Primitive Psychology. Why?" His tone was concerned and suspicious.

Hecuba growled, knowing she'd have to trust someone outside the circle eventually. She just prayed that now was the right time. "I don't have time to explain fully. And I don't have the proof yet, but Jonah has kidnapped Nea." There was a shriek from the bed. "And I need to find Thomas. I may..." she swallowed her pride. "I may need your help."

His voice was steady and strong when he finally answered. "Tell me what you want me to do."



At 4:15, Thomas walked out of the Williams building, finished with his final exam. He stretched, let the others who had finished roughly at the same time move beyond him. He was free for two months. Free to begin making Sooneawa his wife. A summer of hunting and learning to live her way, to become one with her people as best a mystically challenged person could be. He laughed, started to stride towards Cather to grab his things when he saw the cat sitting at the foot of the tree. He looked stern and on edge. He crossed the short distance and bent in front of him, began stroking his cheek tufts.

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“Come to escort me to Nea?” he chuckled. “Making sure I don’t get cold paws?”

Something in the cat’s manner sent a chill through his blood. The animal seemed genuinely sorry about something. The cat moved over a bit, bent and picked something up in his teeth, pressed the wad of paper into Thomas’s hand. Hecuba had decided it was less conspicuous waded up than neatly folded.

Thomas opened the short note. His hands began to shake. Shoving the note into his pocket he turned and ran. Gaganan followed.



Thomas was the last to arrive at the Redbirds. Gaganan actually beat him there and was sitting at the table in Julia’s lap being consoled as she tried to coax him to lick a bit of frosting off her fingers. Even Henry was there, looking a little confused. He saw Thomas’s arrival as a lifeboat. “I’m still not sure what’s going on,” he began. “Hecuba insists that Nea was kidnapped, yet here we sit doing nothing! Shouldn’t we at least call the police?”

“Everything in its turn, Mr. Braebury,” said Joseph, forcing Thomas to sit down at the table and putting a steaming mug of a vivid orange liquid in front of him.

“What...”

“Tea. Drink it,” snapped Anang.

“First, the circumstances under which we discovered the kidnapping are... not admissible to officials of any sort,” Joseph began, choosing his words carefully in present company.

“Huh?” Henry said.

“Psychic divinations are often laughed at in police stations,” growled Anang.

There was an answering growl from Gaganan who, tired of Julia fussing over him, walked across the table to settle into Thomas’s lap.

“Is that how... why you think... tarot cards? Visions?” Henry gaped.

Hecuba gave him a scathing look. “I told you, you didn’t need to come along. You insisted.”

“Hey, if my roomie’s fiancé is in trouble, I’m honour-bound to do everything I can,” he retorted. “If witchcraft,” he said, using the word skeptically, “is all we have to say she’s been taken, then what hard evidence can it lead us to that we *can* take to the police?”

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Hecuba half stood, started to lay into him when the rest of his words sank in. Before anything else could be said, Joseph took over.

“All right. First things first. What time was Nea supposed to be back from her swim?” he asked.

“She was supposed to meet me at five at her dorm. We were leaving town,” Thomas sighed, drinking his tea. The liquid seemed to leech all the panic out of him.

“She told me she’d be back about 4:30 to dry off and change,” Julia added, more playing with her slice of cake than really eating it.

Joseph glanced up at the clock. “We have five minutes before she’s even overdue. We cannot call anyone until she is legitimately late. Until we have had time to miss her. So. We will wait until six o’clock then we call the Mounties.”

“Mounties? You actually *have* Mounties?” Julia gaped.

“Why not the police?” Hecuba asked.

Anang shook her head. “The Mounties usually deal with anything involving the First Nations. That this is the kidnapping of an indigenous maiden... they get it on both counts.”

“Is it smart to involve them?” Julia asked. “I mean, given what he’s already done an’ what we think he can do... They’re not gonna be able to stop him even if they manage to find him.”

Joseph shook his head. “We know that. But, we have to anyway. We’ll look our way, find her on our own. But when we do, we need to be able to do something *with* him. It’ll be easier to have him arrested if they already suspect he’s done something. Not to mention that any rash acts on the parts of certain individuals,” he added, levelling his gaze at Thomas, “might be overlooked due to ...passion.”

Thomas lifted his head. He had been listening to everything, stunned. “How can we find her?” he asked, his voice soft. “How do we deal with the Mounties and still manage to look and what is he doing to her in the meanwhile?”

“He’s going to want her alive, Thomas,” Hecuba said, setting a hand on his across the table. He met her eyes. “I’ve seen the way he looked at her. He went through an awful lot to possess her. He’s not going to damage that. Not yet. The longer it takes the higher the risk, but we have a few days at least.”

“You’re sure?”

“As sure as anyone can be. Besides, Gaganan’s friends are following where he took her. We just have to find a legal lead.”

He nodded numbly, buried his hands in Gaganan’s fur. The cat leaned his

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weight back against him, supporting each other.

The clock ticked by another five minutes with people fidgeting at the table, sipping the tea Anang forced on them. Finally Thomas spoke. "Alright, here's the deal."

Everyone looked up at him.

"Joe, you and your wife, as our ... marital sponsors... were planning to throw us a little going away party. All of us. You decided this yesterday, but wanted this to be a surprise for Nea."

"Why wouldn't it be a surprise for you too?" Joseph asked suspiciously.

"Cause I found out about it ...by accident. It became my job to get Nea from the dorm at five, get her loaded into the car and drive over here. That accounts for why we all came here, what we're waiting on her for. I will head to the dorm to wait for her now. I'll call here after a bit, maybe a couple times to check to see if she's there yet, make an effort to 'find' her. Then one of you go to the lake to check, see if there is any sign of her. We know there isn't, but look anyway..."

Anang's sudden rise from the table made him stop. She took a bundled handkerchief from a drawer and laid it in the middle of the table, untied it. In the middle lay Nea's watch, silver ring and the necklace that Julia had bought for her birthday. "I went as soon as I was told. Hawk said there was something the marten was keeping for her. There was some fussing, but... Nea promised her a fish to watch them. She was delivering the fish when she was grabbed. At least that was all the Hawk spirit could tell me. The marten collected her fish after they had gone," she said quietly.

He nodded stiffly. "Fine. Just tell them you went after I called. Everyone is supposed to be here by now, unless you have an exam?" Everyone shook their heads. "Then put together a quick, cheap going away party, will you, Anang? I'll make it up to you."

She nodded.

Thomas gave Gaganan a last squeeze before transferring him to his chair as he stood. "I'll... I'll find her, don't you worry about that."

The cat gave his nose a lick, then watched with his paws on the back of the chair as he strode out the kitchen door.

Not ten minutes later both the cat and Anang covered their ears. Anang actually dropped the bowl she was holding. It would have broken if Henry had not caught it. Joseph bent over her in a panic. Even Hecuba was looking around the room as if trying to see something fluttering just beyond her sight. Gaganan

hopped onto the centre of the table and began to puff up, hissing and chattering at the air. Henry just stared, bug-eyed. The room was filled with a light, random wind, not really blowing in any direction and all of them at once. It was as if a thousand birds had flown into the room in a panic, setting hair to disarray and blowing napkins off the table.

Finally Anang broke her husband's hold and bellowed to the room in a language none of them understood.

There was a sudden silence in the house, not even the ticking of the clock on the wall could be heard. She pointed at the table, as if ordering something onto it. Henry blindly moved to set the bowl on it, but Joseph put his arm out, gestured for him to set it on the counter. Gaganan shifted in the chair, sitting up like a king on his throne and levelling his gaze at something on the table to which he and Anang listened intently. They both chattered at turns to the invisible guests, to the awe of both Henry and Julia. Hecuba just stood there, rubbing her arms and feeling uncomfortable.

Henry noticed Hecuba swaying a bit, saw a greater pallor than normal to her cheek. He stepped up behind her, placing himself in case she fainted. She leaned back against him, drawing strength from him. "Is it bad?" he whispered, not sure what was going on or what poltergeist had visited the kitchen.

"It's not good," she answered. Her eyes were riveted on the table. Letting her focus blur, she could almost see the flock of small, bright, winged forms that covered it.

After several moments, Anang held out her hand to her husband who obediently handed her the tobacco pouch that hung at his hip. She sprinkled a little bit of the loose, shredded leaves on the table.

Henry and Julia watched, stunned, as that too vanished. The wind stirred up again, then died. Outside the clamour of an enormous flock of birds could be heard in the garden.

"What... what was that?" Henry managed.

Anang turned on him, her eyes bright. "Spirits. The birds sent to follow Nea to see where she was taken," she said flatly.

"Spirits?" he repeated dumbly.

"It is time you were educated, Mr. Braebury. If you are to live with my Nea and her *niinimoshenh*, then you had best know now what you're getting into," she said.

Hecuba came to her senses, glancing over her shoulder at him, uncertain. "And if he... rejects?"

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Anang's eyes never left Henry's. "Then we bind his tongue. Maybe make him forget, but that is harder. Right now, we need his blind eyes."

"Blind... I don't need glasses..." he protested.

She looked at him as if he had just said something incredibly obtuse. "Where did that come from?"

"Ya said his blind eyes," Julia repeated.

"Hmmm. Must have been a reason," she sighed, brushing past him to get a batch of cookies out of the oven before they burned. "Joe, get me the scrabble set. Just the tiles."

Without asking why, he obeyed.

A few moments later they were sitting at the table again with the cat on it in front of the tiles. They had been arranged upright, in roughly alphabetized piles for him.

Anang finally explained what the spirits had seen. "They followed the car into the mountains. But... they reached a point they could not pass. Some kind of warding they think."

"Damned clever," Hecuba growled.

"Well, that's good, in a way..." Julia piped up. "He's got to be at the centre of that area!"

"Not necessarily," Joseph sighed.

"I wouldn't be," Hecuba added. "I'd make sure it was uneven, so finding me was an extra chore. Don't think he wouldn't think of it too. Can't take that chance."

Gaganan had moved some of the tiles around on the table. *Two kilometres.*

Henry's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Did he just...?"

Hecuba looked over at him. "Don't faint on us now, fuzzy."

Anang nodded at what the cat had written. "That's right. They tested the edges. It's what took so long. The warding extends almost two kilometres. She could be in any nook or cranny of that territory."

"Well, we know what road he took in, don't we?" Julia piped. "That narrows the search, don't it?"

Joseph shrugged. "A bit. But not enough."

"I've been up there," Henry said. "I spent a number of weekends on those slopes. That road branches about forty times past that point. He could still be anywhere."

Anang nodded, continued. "And they saw him come back out again... without her. He's back on campus, off to establish an alibi and she's heaven knows where

The Speaker

out there in the woods guarded by hell only knows what.”

“This is not going to sit well with Thomas,” Henry muttered.

They all nearly jumped out of their skins when the phone rang.



Thomas said the piece he'd rehearsed the whole way over here and the last fifteen minutes he'd stood waiting in the lobby. He made sure he was seen, used the phone behind the desk. “You're sure?” he said. “Maybe she's still at the lake? ... Uhhuh, you check there, I'll... I'll have someone up here check her floor. Maybe she's just taking a long shower.”

The guy behind the desk, who was more than a little moody to be stuck with this shift, groaned and made a call to the third floor RA. When she didn't answer, he tried the fourth, and managed to catch Martha on her way out. She agreed to check.

He paced the lobby, the calming effects of Anang's tea beginning to wear off.

Martha came trotting down the stairs, crossed to him when she saw him. “You the one who's concerned?” she asked with narrowed eyes.

“Yes!”

“And you would be?” she asked.

“Her fiancé. I'm taking her to meet my mother today. She was supposed to meet me at five and it's nearly half past now. This is not like her,” he said, his worry genuine. The more time he wasted with this charade, the more time *he* had to do whatever he wanted with Nea.

“Maybe she had a test run over?” she offered.

“No,” he shook his head. “I saw her roommate before I went to my last test at three. She said she got back from her last exam and was going to the lake for a swim before she met me here at five. I'm worried something might have happened.”

Martha seemed to be weighing him. “You think she might have forgotten what time it was?”

“Not a chance. She's a native girl. She should be back by now. Could you just... check her room, please?”

“What about her roommate?”

Thomas was losing patience, adjusted his stance to control the temper beginning to flare. “She's at a mutual friend's. They are...” he sighed, as if confessing, “throwing Nea a surprise party. Julia's off campus. I can call her for you if you like but...” he lowered his voice, “she told me she had a stalker earlier this

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year and frankly... I'm a bit concerned. If he was going to do something now would be the perfect time, you know?"

She studied him a moment more, arms across her chest. "Have you ever given her roses?"

He met her gaze. "Not one I didn't hand pick and hand deliver," he growled, knowing where she was going with this. "She doesn't like long stems."

She suddenly turned to the man at the desk and held out her hand. "Keys to 326."

Stunned, the guy got the spares out of the locker and handed it to her.

"Follow me," Martha told him.

Everything was as it was expected to be. Luggage neatly waiting by the door, her side of the dorm walls completely barren and the bed stripped to the mattress cover. The other side had an unmade bed, suitcases half packed and all the computer peripherals already boxed. Lulabelle squeaked in her cage begging for attention.

"Just how Julia said she left it," he sighed. "She hasn't been back. Now I'm really starting to worry."

"No towel, no spare clothes laid out," she commented. "Are you so sure she didn't come back?"

He shook his head. "She... swims as is and air dries," he replied. It wasn't *really* a lie. "Which is why she didn't go to the pool." He shrugged. "Native thing I guess. Communing with nature."

Martha nodded. "Have you checked the lake?" she suggested, sliding open Nea's closet and peering into its emptiness hoping for some clue.

"Friends are doing that now. They're closer."

She moved to the door again. "Why don't we go back downstairs and call them again. They've had time?"

He nodded.

She escorted him back down to the lobby, skirting students lugging boxes of belongings and waited while Thomas called the Redbirds again. Anang answered. "Was she there?" he asked.

He listened as she told him what they had found, Anang repeating it for the benefit of anyone who might be able to hear her voice on his end. He hung up the phone, real despair beginning to have its way with him. "They found her jewelry and keys, where she stowed it to keep it dry, but no sign of her."

"Would she have taken a detour between the lake and here?" she asked, a paragon of calm and sense.

The Speaker

He shook his head. “She is as eager as I am to get on the road. She’d have left the lake when she heard the bells at four, knowing I’d be out of my test at any moment.”

She put her hands on his shoulders, looked him in the eye. “All right. Do this for me. Walk to the lake. Take the route she would. Maybe you’ll meet her returning. If you don’t, head to this friend’s house and call the police. Then call me here, let me know. I’ll stay another day if I have to. If you *do* find her, just let me know before you guys leave, ok?”

He nodded. “Thank you.”

He turned immediately and hurried out the dorm. In spite of his desire to rush straight to Redbird’s, he did as she suggested. Just because he knew what had happened didn’t mean he could behave as if he did, not if he wanted to be free of suspicion to be able to find her himself. Once he was at the lake he actually paused to look around. The place looked odd in the creeping dusk. The campfire pit had been bizarrely swept clean. No trace remained of the ashes from previous fires. He continued around the copse, exiting on the other side where a wider track was, big enough to serve as a narrow road. Here he found tire tracks, faint in the dry road, but there they were, along with barely visible, tread-less footprints that walked between the tire marks. He assumed these were Anang’s and followed his example, not wishing to disturb what little evidence Jonah had left. He ran to Joseph’s house.



The Mounties had been called. They came, asked their questions, made their observations. Someone was dispatched to the dorm to question the RA and anyone there, others were sent to the lake where they combed the shore and woods with flashlights and dogs. They took note of the clean fire-pit, finding it significant in its sterility. They took casts of the treads and the footprints, taking prints of the shoes of everyone in the house, to eliminate or incriminate. They took Nea’s things that had been found with them as evidence, verified by fibre match that they were found where Anang said they had been found. Everything lined up and nothing pointed to any answers.

The inspector sat down at the table with them. Thomas had his elbows on the table and his hands buried in his hair, a half empty cup of tea in front of him. Julia was sitting at the table with Hecuba and Anang, Joseph standing behind her chair and Henry between Thomas and Hecuba. The cat paced the kitchen fretfully,

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rubbing up against various legs and occasionally stood up to paw at someone, meowing pitifully. Thomas could only guess at what the cat was *really* saying.

The inspector was not encouraging. He began with a sigh. “Unfortunately, aside from the tire marks, which may be unrelated...” he added, “we can find no evidence she was taken by force from the lake. The dogs followed her scent on the eastern trail from the campus into the lake, but not out again. They can find no trace of her anywhere else. She may have left by the same route, but then we’d have found her. If she went skinny-dipping, as has been suggested, where are her clothes? You are sure that handkerchief of jewelry was the only thing you found? No clothing?” he asked Anang.

“I assure you, inspector, that was all I found or I’d have said.”

He sighed again, thanked her as she blindly refilled his coffee cup. “We just don’t have enough to suspect foul play.”

“She had a stalker,” Thomas growled between his teeth. “Is that not suspicious enough?”

“Not when he has an alibi,” he shook his head sadly.

Thomas looked up suddenly, eyes blazing. “What?”

“He was taking an exam at the time of the disappearance. Verified by his professor. The time before and after our time frame was simply not enough to have done this deed without leaving an undue amount of evidence. Which we have precious little of.”

The constable behind him commented, “Someone’s going to have a trunk full of ashes though. And that will leave evidence enough if we ever find the car. My guess is, whoever it was had been waiting there a while. Why else would they clean the fire-pit? *Someone’s* been living out there.”

Hecuba shook her head. “Students go out there, use the fire pit on cooler nights. A lover’s lane. It’s a beautiful spot when the moon is full. But not a lot of us know about it.”

“Nea and I have spent a few evenings there ourselves,” Thomas piped.

“Well there is no evidence anyone’s been there for a very long time.”

Hecuba set her head on her fist. “Those of us who do go there police our trash carefully. Part of what the fire-pit was for.”

“Which doesn’t help us right now. The only thing we can do is try and track down this car and send divers down in the morning,” said the inspector.

Julia stifled a shriek. Hecuba pulled her close.

“I’ll get with the campus police and see what they have on the stalker. Chances

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are it was not who you thought it was. We may find something on that broken vase they were unable to do anything with,” he said, rising.

Thomas frowned. “Broken vase?”

Hecuba put her hand on his arm. “We’ll tell you later.”

“The RA on the fourth floor informed us she had received a suspicious note with a bud vase and rose just before Christmas,” the inspector said, explaining anyway. “She handed it to the campus police who will be handing it to us.” He looked from one to the other of them. “If anyone calls about a ransom...”

“We’ll call immediately,” Joseph said.

“But I do not hold any hope of it,” the inspector continued. “She is not a high profile individual, no real family, scholarship, and taken at the time it would be hardest for us to find her, with everyone leaving. No chance of her having just... run off?” he asked, for the third time that night.

Julia managed to answer. “She would not have left her cat.”

He nodded, gestured for the constable to follow him out. “Let’s go to the hospital and speak with the staff there,” he said as Joseph showed them out.

“The mysterious flowers?” the constable asked. The inspector nodded.

Joseph watched at the window until they had driven out of sight, then returned to the kitchen. “Now how do we find her?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE:

Echoes of Agony

Nea stirred. She was on a comfortable surface, the air slightly cool on bare skin and no sounds of life around her. There was a mild ache behind her eyes. She ran her palm across the ground, felt fabric. 'A bed then?'. She opened her eyes. She was in a dim room with a stone ceiling. She sat up, shivered. Her hands instinctively went to her arms, discovered they were bare. She looked at herself. She was wearing a satin negligee. It was an expensive type, spaghetti strapped, heavy, beaded lace decolletage, low but not exposing, fit snug to the hip where it belled to the floor. It was beautiful and tasteful, but she found it unnerving. Thinking about it, she could still feel the bone hasp of her panties against her hips, but it was a small comfort. She got off the bed. Her hair fell over her shoulders, unbraided, carefully brushed out.

She looked around her. The room was larger than any bedroom she'd ever had, but modestly furnished. The bed was a queen size with several pillows and a thick comforter. There was a large, circular rug on the stone floor and the walls were unpainted stone, their texture too smooth for cinder-block but still put together like a cellar. There was a small table and two chairs against one wall with a reading lamp, which was on and the only current source of light. There were no windows. The only other furniture was a dressing table with toiletries and cosmetics on it, and wardrobe next to an open door through which she could see tiled floor and assumed it was a bathroom.

There was no one else in the room, yet somehow, she could not shake a

creeping feeling, a sense as if there was a snake in the room.

Jonah leaned back against the door, which in his cloaked state guaranteed she would not see it until he moved. He watched her, took fiendish delight in the slow dawning of comprehension on her finely carved features, savouring every movement and subtle expression: the hand that crossed the curve of her breast, the unconscious finger down her hip feeling for under-things. He remembered the sight of those tawny mounds as he undressed her, removing the bra. The panties were exquisite though, so he had put the silk bikinis he had bought for her back in the drawer. Who would have thought someone like her would have spent that kind money on unseen luxuries?

It took Nea a few minutes to assimilate everything. She felt odd, thick almost, as if the air were heavier than it should be or her senses dulled somehow. The air was chill but clean, no trace of cat hair or animal in it, which made her uncomfortable. There was no apparent way in or out, though she had yet to examine what she was convinced had to be a bathroom, had better be a bathroom. Nothing she was wearing, accept for her underwear, was hers, not even the bracelets she had just noticed. She looked at them. Like everything else, they were beautiful, almost luminous: worked silver cuffs with a tamped pattern which looked to be a cross between a Greek keynote and Celtic knot work that ran into itself rather than over or under. They were thin, about an inch wide, and seemed to have no clasps of any sort, and were too snug to have been slipped over her hand. Suddenly, she wanted them off. She clawed at them, trying to find a hinge or gap, some way to open them but they were solid. She tried to break them, but, thin though they were, they were strong.

She stopped, tried to think clearly. She leaned back against the wall, unwilling to turn her back to the room, ignoring the cold stone against her bared skin. She had gone swimming. She had caught a fish and was taking it to the marten. The animal had seen someone, something which had spooked her. She remembered the sense of something heavy being thrown over her, enveloping her, but it had more faded into existence than descended. 'A spell then'. At that thought an image rose up, unbidden, from the depths: Jonah's triumphant face between the trees. He had seen everything. She felt suddenly weak.

She turned, began feeling the wall, trying to find evidence of a hidden door. There had to be one, how else could he have gotten her in here? She checked thoroughly, but the wall was extremely solid and well built. As she reached across the corner, her fingers felt wood rather than stone. She turned, hope ballooning

inside and found something warm and soft instead. The balloon popped.

Jonah had watched her with delight, thinking ‘clever girl’. He would have to take other precautions. He knew she would eventually find him and waited patiently. She turned right into his arms, which he happily wrapped around her as he dropped the glamour. “Well,” he purred. “If I had known you were so eager I’d have revealed myself sooner. But this is very nice too.”

Horror and revulsion petrified her for a moment before instinct kicked in. Her instinct was to shift and shred. She reflexively attempted to extend claws, to remember puma in hopes of frightening him to gain her freedom, to show him she was too dangerous to play this game with. But instead of growing fur and fang there was a searing flash of light from her wrists which did not come without some pain. The snarl died in her throat and she stared at the bracelets in shock.

Jonah chuckled, took her hands gently in his, held them up so she could see the silver cuffs. “Beautiful, aren’t they?” he said. “Marvellous The Russian bastard has really outdone himself. And they are so useful,” he said proudly, as if he were explaining and showing off all the bells and whistles of a fancy new watch he had given her, instead of displaying the security of her prison. “Of course, when I had the Master make them, I had no idea how appropriate the materials were, but of course... dead useful. Go ahead, try that again,” he coaxed.

Without thinking, she did, her eyes locked on the bands of silver. The light began in the middle of the maze pattern and raced along the length until it rebounded on itself, when it flared and burned her with the sensation of ice left too long against the skin.

Jonah caressed her arm as he held one hand, traced the pattern with his other finger. His voice was tender, deceptively pleasant. “See, the silver of course is perfect binding material.” At the word binding, she shivered, her horror growing. “The maze traps your power, makes it lose itself before it can obey you. It, in effect, reverses your circuit, turns you off. Now, this does not prevent magic from working on you. *Au contraire*. A strand of your hair is imbedded in the maze, only your magic doesn’t work. Mine... they obey me, you see. A strand of my hair is in the outer edge,” he said, running his finger along the tiny lip. “With them, you cannot resist me.”

She looked up into his eyes, her own blazing with defiance. She suddenly fought his grip, surging violently against him which only made him laugh.

“Oh, I could seize your mind again. But I don’t need to now. In fact, I think I’d prefer you free willed... and bowing to me anyway. Eventually you will.”

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“Never!” she growled.

“Allow me to demonstrate,” he said casually, pushing her back from him.

He made a small gesture with his hands and she felt the bracelets obey. Nea found her arms spread out from her, and no amount of struggle could put them down again. She might as well have been fighting the grip of a giant. Another gesture and they began to pull her toward the ceiling. She felt her feet slowly leave the floor. Her toes scabbled for purchase, but they were inches from the stone. Her arms spread in a ‘y’ caused more discomfort in her chest than her shoulders.

He stepped up. She was now at eye level to him. His fingers delicately traced her collarbone, the arch of her long bronze neck. “You see,” he leaned in closer, his mouth against her ear and whispered, “he has plans for you, the Master does. But I have plans of my own. So long as you please me...” He left it deliberately unsaid.

Rage gave her strength. She pulled upwards, wrapping her legs around his waist and squeezed, applying a crushing pressure to his kidneys. She pulled him close to her face and snarled. “I would rather die than please you.”

“Ah!” he yelled, taken by surprise. At a gesture from him she let go, her toes aimed at point towards the ground, her legs almost glued together. Nothing she could do would separate or bend them. “That will not do,” he said, pulling himself together, adjusting his attire. “No. We must learn never to try that again.”

“What are you going to do? Slap me around?” she scoffed.

His smile was sadistic. He made a flourished pass of his hand before her. “*Obtempero.*”

Nea felt something settle over her. Another wave and her feet touched the floor, her hands floating to her sides.

“Now kiss me,” he ordered.

To her horror, Nea obeyed.



Jonah stalked into the next room less than a half hour later. He had dressed, but left his shirt unbuttoned. He locked the door behind him. He was physically sated, but... somehow unsatisfied. Perhaps it had been the division of his attention, maintaining his control of her. No matter that would change.

The Master was sitting in a chair at the table, an ancient book on his lap, his feet propped up on the only other chair. He was eating an apple. “Not go the way you’d planned, *Raduka*? Strangely... unsatisfied?” he chuckled, taking a deep bite of the fruit.

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Jonah, noticing the font was filled with water as he passed it, growled. “Enjoy the show?” he snapped. “I did not take you for a voyeur, Master.” His eyes passed over the pattern painstakingly chalked and glued to the centre of the floor. ‘Soon, old man’, he thought. ‘And you’ll never see it coming.’

He waved his hand dismissively, spoke with his mouth full. “Psha! I did not stay for the ...dirty work. She is too skinny for my tastes. I merely wished to see how you would handle her.”

He raised an eyebrow, policing his reactions carefully, not wishing to show too much defiance yet. “And how did I rate?” he asked, leaning on the high back of the second chair as the Master did not move his feet.

“Began clever enough,” he shrugged, closing his book and tossing the apple core at the trash in the corner. He did not seem to care that he missed. “Botched the rest as expected. Resorted to control spells.” He stood, and returned the book to the shelf.

Jonah grit his teeth. “What was I to do? Strike her? Mar that ...cheek?” He had almost said ‘perfect’. The fact bothered him: that the description had even occurred to him almost as much as the fact that he had almost said it. “To beat her that way would have played to her expectations, given her something to stand against. She will take time. She is proud. I could see in her eyes how much she hated being under my control.”

The Master snorted. “Too easy. She should bend to you because you are more powerful than she. Because your will is greater. You need to demonstrate that. Carry it in with you like a visible force.”

“So you say I *should* strike her?” Jonah frowned. That was not something he condoned. Not out of any misguided sense of gallantry, but that it ruined the facade, left evidence. “That may have been the way you dominated women in your day, but here even the women consider it a sign of weakness.”

The Master turned and looked at him at that, raised an eyebrow at the ‘in your day’ comment. He let it go. “That is not what I am saying at all. On the contrary,” he laid a book on the table and flipped it open. “All you need is personal presence. And, well, in your case, a single spell.”

“Yet you sneered at me for using one,” he defended, half glancing at the open page. The Master was standing to the side of the book, as if he had no interest in its contents.

The Master smiled. “In this case, you just need the right one. She already knows you. Has no fear of you.”

The Speaker

“I don’t really think she fears anything.”

“They all fear something. But you have a past with her to overcome. Since she has defeated you in the past, she feels she can do so again, easily. You must show her the error of her ways. Later I will go in to her, show you what I mean about presence. Show you how to have a woman on her knees without ever laying a hand on her. Or a spell. You will watch in the font. You will practice walking with menace. You will exude it,” he breathed, stepping closer to Jonah, seemed to swell up before him, demonstrating. It took all of Jonah’s will not to take a step back. The Master seemed to notice and laughed. “You will apply this one little spell as often as needed,” he said tapping the book. “There after, combined with this subtle technique, she will be clay in your hands.”

He glanced over the spell on the page, his eyes growing wide. He could see its promise. “Why not now,” he asked, not looking up.

The Master’s voice came from behind him, at the font. “Because she needs time to fret, to clean up, to seek a way out, to hope and despair and hope again. To finish scalding that lithe brown body you so messily abused.” The image in the font showed her form in the tiny shower, a dark figure in a cloud of steam. He chuckled. That was always the first thing they did. So predictable. “And you need time to absorb the nuances of that spell. Which you can do in a few hours.” He passed his hand over the water, the view changing to the sky above the house. “Right now, the time is right for you to get back to work. You only have three hours of zenith to complete that northern point, so I suggest you get to work.”

Jonah sighed, fuming inside, and went to the cabinet where the ingredients were kept, pulled out the rabbit skin glue and the powders and the book with the charts he had made to help him with the complicated design.



Nea was even colder now that she had finished the shower. Her skin burned, was bright red even as goosebumps were raised by the chill of the room. She had not even bothered to turn the cold water on. It had not helped. She had had no idea the sexual act could be so vile and degrading. Once she realized she could not stop herself, that her body was responding to his raw will through the spell, she had tried to take her mind away completely. She was a prisoner in her own body. She had tried to escape it by closing her eyes and imagining Thomas in Jonah’s stead, but he had

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not allowed her even that freedom. He had made her look at him. The act was still rough, almost clumsy. She had fought well enough, she supposed, in the beginning. He had sensed the resistance, and taken more complete control of her body.

She glared at her image in the mirror over the tiny sink. There was defiance yet in her eyes. No tears. She was proud of that. That she would not give him.

She looked over the little bathroom once more. The shower had no door, not even a doorway really. It was just a shower head and a drain in the floor at the end of the tiny room. There was a toilet at enough distance to keep the toilet paper dry, a bare sink with no cabinet and the barest toiletries on a shelf. There was a toothbrush and paste, shampoo and soap, some lotion and a shower-proof ladies electric razor, nothing more. He had taken no chances. Even the mirror was polished metal, no glass she could break and harm herself with.

Wrapping herself tightly in the large towel, she investigated the wardrobe. It contained nothing but negligees and revealing dresses. Nothing that might provide resistance or hinder his access to her body. She put on a halter necked sundress and snatched the sheet off the bed, wrapping it around herself for warmth.

Before he had left her, he had said two words, almost without thinking about them, and all traces of their activities vanished from the bed. It had not stopped her from feeling she needed to cleanse herself. But it had made her think. Would he not have used that same spell when he kidnapped her, to wipe out all traces of himself? It would make finding her almost impossible. An image of Thomas pulling out his hair trying to find her rose to her mind, but she forcibly dismissed it. If she was going to keep up the will to fight, she could not allow herself to think of such things. They led to despair.

She brushed out her hair, but did not touch the cosmetics that had been laid out, examining the rest of the room as she did. There were books on the table. She looked them over briefly. He apparently had a poor idea of her taste in reading. They were all bodice-rippers. She tossed them back onto the table in disgust and walked away.

She tried the door, but the knob would not even turn. She decided to wedge the chair beneath it. If she was not going to be allowed to fight him once he entered the room, she could at least make him fight to get in.

There being nothing else for her to do, she settled herself in the middle of the floor and immersed herself in chanting and prayers.



The Speaker

Jonah had been relieved when the Master had gone upstairs for a nap. Once he heard the door on the stairs above close, he breathed easier, pulled a second paper from the back of the book, said a word to reveal the chart on the blank paper. He had to rework two of the patterns, but the glue holding the powdered herbs in place had not yet dried, making it easy. He worked quickly, ignoring the pain in his knees and elbows, watching where he was backing up, lest he undo previous work. This part of the circle was crucial.

He finished with nearly an hour to spare, chanted, “*As in ink, so on stone.*” And watched the pattern on the floor shift and alter.

He got off the floor, stretching and rubbing his sore joints. He hid the second chart, made the words vanish again before putting the book away and sank into the chair to read over the new spell humming to himself.



Nea had no idea how much time had passed. She must have dozed off in meditation. It was surreal being unable to measure time, left her feeling as if she had been taken out of it completely. Normally prayers left her with a sense of security and comfort; she could feel the spirits pressing close even if she could sense them no other way. Not so now. Maybe it was the absence of Gaganan, but... she felt distinctly uneasy. She had called to Horse for strength, Fox for cunning and help in escape, Eagle to lead the others to her, but she was unsure her prayers were even heard. Something in the room made her skin crawl.

Suddenly the chair flew across the room, cracking when it slammed violently into the opposite wall, passing less than a metre from her shoulder. She jumped to her feet, ready to meet Jonah head on. The door swung open without a hand upon it, and what stood in the frame took her breath away. It was a man in a black cassock. He had beetled brows and dark, penetrating eyes, and silvery hair that was tied back at the nape. He had strong features and pale skin and the feeling of thunder about him. His eyes locked on hers as he strode into the room like a swelling storm.

Nea backed quickly away, unable to hide the pure terror that rose like a flood within her. She found herself against the wall. She gasped, the stone freezing on her bare back, her protective sheet forgotten on the floor. He loomed over her, so close she could feel his breath on her face, his hand millimetres from her cheek. She shuddered, terrified of those lips descending upon hers, of that skin connecting, of

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that body forcing itself upon her. Her senses reeled. She was a rabbit staring down the gullet of a wolf.

A tiny squeal escaped her throat, a strangled cry. She closed her eyes. He was going to touch her, possess her. Rape by Jonah she could handle. This man...

She jumped at the sound of a thunderclap, her eyes snapping open. She was alone in the room. It had been the slamming of the door she had heard. She sank to the floor, sobbing, drawing her legs up to her chest. "Thomas, *where in God's name are you?*" she whispered.



Watching in the font, Jonah remembered why he had apprenticed himself to this unnamed man in the first place, what had drawn him to submit, he who had never bowed his will to anyone. He was filled with awe and admiration once more. He also realized just how dangerous a man he was dealing with. He glanced at the unfinished circle on the floor and wondered if he knew.

The Master strode over to the font, stared down at Jonah. Jonah lowered his eyes, acknowledging the older man's superiority. His eyes glimpsed the point of the pentagram and the words 'for now' ran through his mind.

He felt rather than heard the Master move away. When he spoke, the voice was drifting down the stairs. "Practice, *Raduka*, and some day.... Take her as you will. I will be in my tower. I am not to be disturbed."

He looked up at the ceiling. Good, that meant he would be unavailable for hours. When he actually retired to that antiquated spire, practising whatever rituals he did there, nothing would reach him. The house could explode and he would not know. Even Jonah had no idea what went on up there. The two floors that rose above the rest of the house were forbidden to him. Not even sound drifted down from them, though at times a smell followed him out that single door. He was not ready to explore there yet. Someday though, those secrets would be his too.

He turned back to the door across the room. She awaited him. Soon she would be warm and pliant, or at the very least more entertaining. He struck the surface of the water in the basin with a finger, scattering the image of Nea hugging herself against the wall. When the ripples settled, unnaturally quick, they reflected only the ceiling. Jonah skirted the unfinished pentagram, strode purposefully to the door.



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Nea heard the knob turn, looked up. When she realized it was Jonah walking in and not that nightmare her emotions shifted violently.

His voice was soft as he leaned back against the closed door, observing her. Her eyes were reddened, but dry. "I warned you."

She seized the chair lying wounded beside her, rose and hurled it in one motion, lunging after it like a mad beast. Jonah dodged just in time, was only clipped by a leg as the chair flew apart. It was the flash of light from her bracelets that warned him she had charged. He threw an open palmed punch in her direction, the raw power striking her a foot before flesh made contact and sent her hurtling back. Once more, Nea found herself suspended in the air, hanging crucified for his pleasure.

He sighed, showing no anger, only patient disappointment. "I did not wish to do this, but you leave me little choice," he said quietly.

She glared at him. There was a change in his manner. He still wore the same black pants he had the night before; his round collared, white dress shirt tucked in, but unbuttoned. His hair brushed the top of his collar, uncombed it seemed to soften his arrogantly chiseled face. Had he been paler, she could easily have seen him as a vampire. Her fury, however, was not yet spent.

"What are you going to do?" she snapped. "Leave me hanging here for hours until I relent? Make me 'dance' to your tune again? Pray I will eventually break?" she sneered. "I will break, you know ...your hold. I am made of stronger stuff than you realize."

He laughed. "Oh, yes. I know. Why do you think I have been so fiercely attracted to you? However, I will never need *that* spell again; though I promise you, you will dance. *Agonare!*" The word rumbled in his throat, brought a faint sneer to his lip as he spoke. The pass his hand made before her was almost dismissive.

Nea wasn't sure what to think. At first nothing seemed to happen. But then there was an itch beneath her bracelets and she looked up, saw them glowing a faint red. The light ran around the rims of the bands, not through the maze, and entered her arm. She could almost see her bones through it, in the way one does if you hold your hand up to a really bright light. Veins of light began to race down her arms to the rest of her body. She watched in mute horror, not certain what was going to happen. She felt a warmth, a vague itchiness. But the heat began to surge within her. Her hair began to crackle and rise from static electricity, her muscles to twitch and revolt. It was as if her entire body had become the spring to a lake of fire, the pain

rising from within, exploding outward. She gasped, long and deep, her back arched against her invisible bonds, her head thrown back. Finally, the in-taken breathe was released in a scream that battered the walls. A moment passed like an eternity, a single breath deeply drawn and violently released. The spell slacked off. The pain, however, lingered. Nea hung limp in the air.

Jonah found himself deeply moved. He had begun the spell, gazing with interest, unsure what it would do, knowing only that it would leave no visible mark on her body. He watched it unfold before him with a blooming sense of wonder and awe, like Pygmalion watching his statue slowly coming to life.

He stepped up to her, touched her with hesitant fingers, caressing her heaving breast, the curve of her hip, her quivering arms as one hesitates to touch a work of art, a statue of ancient beauty one is afraid will crumble away beneath your fingers, but you feel compelled to touch to assure yourself it is real. “You... you are a creature of infinite surprises, my rose. You are poetry in motion, breathtaking at rest. In pain... you are exquisite,” he breathed.

His hunger for her had reached ravenous proportions. He took her in his arms with a gentleness that surprised even him. Obeying his unconscious thought, the bands let her go. He carried her to the bed, laid her upon it, stretched himself beside her. She was barely conscious. He arranged her hair on the pillow, brushed his fingertips over her eyelids. Wherever he touched her she quivered. Tiny whimpers and moans escaped her. She flinched and gasped at the barest touch, but they were minute, subtle, almost fearful, barely heard as if she did not even have the strength left cry out. Clearly the pain was still echoing through her body. He stroked her skin, fascinated by every reaction.

Nea was trapped by the echoes of agony. The spring had ceased, the fluids flowing through her no longer molten. But they had left their mark. Her skin still burned, her bones felt charred to cinders. The tiniest motion caused pain to blossom yet again, like placing ice on a burn but a thousand times magnified. His lips upon her skin felt like a frost-brand, more pain than relief. Even his breath felt like fire.

His hand slid along her leg, barely touching the smooth surface, lighter than butterfly wings. The fingers pressed minutely harder as they crept beneath the hem of her skirt, but felt like lion’s claws raking deep into her flesh, reaching for her hip. She cried out, arched away, found herself pressing against his bare chest, the fine linen framing it abusing her senses like sisal cloth.

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As he bent his lips to her aching throat, unable to resist tasting the bronze column, a single tear rolled down her cheek.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO:

Falling

Late Sunday morning, Henry suddenly remembered they had to be out of their dorm by that night. He dragged Thomas back to campus to help him finish with the rest of it. Thomas was mostly packed, except for a few last minute things he had intended to just throw in a box after his test. Henry on the other hand, had barely gotten started. Thomas muttered as they worked that it felt a waste of time, being there packing when he should be doing something about Nea.

“And what can you do?” Henry retorted, pulling things from the back of the top shelf of the wardrobe. He clicked on a flashlight to make sure he’d gotten everything. “The only people who *can* do anything right now are Anang and the witch. Even Joseph feels like a third wheel. But at least he’s handling it better.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Thomas snapped. He was tired, he was worried. He wasn’t hungry but couldn’t quite remember the last time he’d eaten.

Henry re-emerged from the wardrobe with a camera strap in his hand. “It means you are driving every one crazy.”

“I can’t help it, man!” he growled. “I mean... what am I supposed to do? I know who has her but not where she is. I know what he’s most likely doing to her and...”

“Don’t finish that thought.”

Thomas glared up at him from under a fringe of unbrushed hair. “I already

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have. I was supposed to protect her, and look what's happened! I feel so useless! Put yourself in my shoes," he snarled, pitching an empty soda bottle he had found under the bed at the waste basket.

Henry sighed. He had been watching the rapid deterioration of Thomas's manner for two days. His hair was ruffled and unkempt, wild from running his hands through it. He hadn't shaved or showered for that matter as far as Henry knew. Judging from the constant hiss and flicker from the TV at the apartment and the sound of frequent pacing, he was pretty sure he hadn't slept either. He shook his head and went back to work.

After another fifteen minutes of inarticulate grousing, Henry snapped the door key to his van off the ring. "Here," he growled. "Why don't you start taking stuff down to the van?"

Thomas took the key, frowning. "The van is all the way down in the pit. Why don't you give me the ignition key too and I'll bring it to the door?"

It was Henry's turn to growl. "You're not driving my van. Not in your condition. Besides... the walk will do you good. ...Air out your head."

Thomas rolled his eyes, but stuffed the key into the coin pocket of his jeans, picked up a couple boxes and left.

He sighed as he approached the elevator. There was a line of people with large stacks of boxes. He turned and headed for the stairs, glad he hadn't grabbed any of the really heavy ones. He realized he shouldn't be snapping like this, not at Henry. He had gone out of his way to help, to be there for him; had put up with Hecuba whom he'd made no bones about disliking. But he felt so impotent in the face of things, the woman he loved being dangled just out of reach, just when everything had begun to come together for them... it was too much. He thought he might go mad if they didn't find her soon. He tried not to think of what might happen to her. But, of course, the minute he tried *not* to think of it... he did.

He navigated the flight of steps down into the pit from the upper side, paused halfway to search for the van. When he found it, he wove his way through the few remaining vehicles and set the boxes down at the back of the van. He unlocked the door, only opening one side and slid the two boxes in. He didn't bother arranging them or maximizing space. He just lifted them up to the floor and shoved them back. He closed the van door but did not walk away from it. He pressed his forehead to the warm metal, the ancient green paint having been heated by the early summer sun. It was nothing compared to the fever in his brain.

He hadn't slept in days, not since that first night when he had found himself

caught in a nightmare: Nea as Rapunzel trapped in her tower, and he the prince climbing her hair to reach her. Only Jonah was the witch, and cut the braid just as his fingers were inches from hers. He had fallen, tangled in the hair, forced to listen to her screams as Jonah...

A car door opening behind him made him jump. He turned. There were only eight cars still on the next row. Not fifteen metres from him, stood Jonah, putting a suitcase in his back seat. "YOU!" Thomas bellowed.

Jonah looked up, startled, then smiled. He closed the back door and opened the front, pulled something out of an inside pocket of his suit jacket. It was an envelope to a plane ticket. He held it up, gave it a little kiss, waved and climbed into the car, laughing. Before Thomas had crossed a third of the distance, the engine roared to life. His own car was on the far side of the lot and didn't have enough gas to get even halfway to the airport at the moment, so he turned, darted back to the van. He shoved the key into the ignition, but it wouldn't turn. He roared with frustration. Henry's van was so old it had separate ignition and door keys. He got out again as Jonah peeled out of the parking lot, began to run back to the dorm.

He ran into Henry at the top of the pit stairs. "Gimme the key!" he yelled.

"What?" Henry exclaimed, trying to see around the boxes in his arms. "Why?"

"I just saw Jonah! He just left! If we hurry we can catch him!"

"Thomas, you are out of your mind!" he exclaimed, dodging as Thomas began reaching for his pocket. He shoved the boxes at him, making him take them. He took the top one off and began to walk calmly down into the pit. "Tell me what happened."

"I saw him. He waved a plane ticket at me. He's on his way right now to the airport! She could be with him!" he cried, trying to hurry Henry down the stairs.

Henry stopped, turned. "Did you see her?"

"Of course not! He wouldn't have her in the open," he snapped. "She was probably in a trunk in the boot, or ... or already there or something... he's not stupid. We have to follow him!"

Henry set his box down, looked his friend over. There was a crazed look in his eye, deep circles and a gauntness to his cheeks. "What good would that do?"

Thomas looked as if he had just been slapped.

Henry sighed, explained what he had meant. "If he's going to the airport, he'll be there a while. There's no way we could find him without knowing what flight he's on, plus we couldn't get past the gate without a ticket anyway."

Thomas dropped his box on top of the other one, felt like tearing his hair out

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as Henry opened the van and began to put the boxes in. At least he wasn't moving as slowly as before. "We have to do *something!*" he cried.

"And we will," Henry said, hating to have to be the voice of reason here. Normally, *he* was the one with the crazy ideas. "We're going back up to the dorm and calling the inspector."

"*What!*"

He grabbed Thomas's shoulders, held him still. "It's the only way. Once he walks through that airport door he's out of our reach. But not the police."

"But if we hurry..."

"We'll do what? Run him off the road? Assault him in the parking lot?" Thomas looked as though he were considering those as viable options. Henry gave him a slight shake to snap him out of it. "He's not stupid, Thomas! She's not with him, not in that car. If she's anywhere other than where Anang told us she is, then she is already at the airport. And for that, we need the inspector. Now, come on," he said, closing the van.

Thomas grabbed his arm, stopped him as he headed for the stairs. "What?" Henry asked.

Thomas pointed out the parking lot gate. "There's a closer phone. The Sweet Shop across the street."

Henry looked over his shoulder, saw the edge of the gingerbread painted building. "Oh, yeah."

The call to the inspector did not go well. In fact, Thomas was in an even worse mood afterwards. Henry had done the talking, afraid Thomas would come across as mad, hurting the chances of having the matter looked into. However, the information he was forced to relay to him was not good. Thankfully, he had not made a scene inside the little market/deli. Henry had led him out, fully aware of the blind fury building within him. Once outside, however he began fuming.

"I still don't understand it," Henry said. "The girls were so sure he hadn't left."

Thomas didn't hear him. When Henry got into the van, his hopes rose. "Finally, some sense!" he exclaimed, eagerly jumping in to the passenger seat. If he thought Henry was driving to the airport, he was grossly disappointed. Henry turned the opposite way. "Where are you going?"

"To see Anang. If he's not where they said he was, then something's not right."

"Yeah, I'll say something's not right," he snarled, and began a heated argument.

When Henry's beat up van finally pulled into the Redbirds' yard, Thomas did not even wait for it to stop before he jumped out and stormed inside. Henry ripped

the keys out of the ignition and chased after him, dropping them in his haste. After flailing to catch them and missing, he cursed and left them in the grass, chased after his friend. “*Thomas!*” he bellowed.

Joseph met him in the living room, having heard the front door slam. “Any news? I’ll get the girls...” His voice trailed off, his motion towards the back door arrested when he saw Thomas’s face and the breathless roommate following. Henry grabbed Thomas’s arm only to be thrown off. “What happened?”

“What happened?” Thomas echoed, his bi-coloured eyes blazing. Henry’s face twisted as he steeled himself, wishing Joseph hadn’t asked. “I’ll tell you what happened! They let him fffucking go is what happened!” he raged, stumbled over the curse word.

Joseph winced at the language. This was not like him. “Let who go?”

“Jonah,” he spat. “I was putting boxes in the van when he strolled into the pit to his car. The bastard had the nerve to *wave* at me!”

“Did he say anything?” Joseph asked.

“No. He *laughed*,” he snapped. “He *waved* a plane ticket and bloody, fucking *laughed at me!*” Thomas buried his hands in his hair, pulling, roared his frustration, and began to pace the living room wildly.

Henry stepped up to the plate, trying to keep his voice low. “We called the inspector, but they said Jonah wasn’t a suspect. They’d already checked out his story and his destination. They weren’t even going to follow him.”

“He’s spending the summer on some island in the...” in his blind fury, Thomas was unable to articulate any word foul enough to express himself, ground out a few half-baked syllables in the interim, “...gr.drk.ng...brkfrakin’ Keys!” he choked, kicking the couch. He pulled himself together suddenly, for a single moment, a thought alighting like a spider in his brain. He strode towards Joseph, barely able to see straight. “Wh... wait... w...why would he go all the way to Florida without her ...leave her here un... unless... she...”

Henry saw the blind panic rising fast, all the blood leaving Thomas’s cheeks, knew what had to be coming. It was the same thought that had occurred to him already. He seized him, afraid he was going to collapse. “He wouldn’t just kill her, Thomas,” he said, desperately. “Not without leaving you with no doubt and no proof of what he’d done. Damn it, Thomas... he knows you’re dating! He’s doing this to hurt you as much as her. Why else would he have taunted you in the pit?” Thomas stared at him blankly at first, as his words sank in.

“He *wouldn’t* just leave her,” he concluded. “He would have found a way to

take her with him,” he exclaimed, tried to throw him off, to get to the door. Henry grunted, trying to maintain his hold. “I told you we should have gone to the airport! He’s either got her there somehow, maybe a trunk or she’s already wherever he’s going!” he snapped, all logic gone, everything they already knew for certain flying out the window. “Let me go! We have to... You’re not listening,” he struggled. “You didn’t listen to me! I told you to follow him but you insisted we come here!” he bellowed, began fighting back in earnest, began slamming his free arm down on Henry’s back, trying to jar him loose, to punish him for not listening. “He’s flying her to Key West and you let him *go!*”

Joseph jumped to help, managed to separate them enough to enable the two of them to restrain Thomas without his being able to strike back. Henry did not relinquish his grip, kept his head out of the way after taking a clip to the lip from Thomas’s shoulder. Thomas was senseless, yelling, screaming to keep from sobbing.

“Calm down,” Joseph ground through his teeth. “This isn’t helping.”

“How can I calm down?” he cried, throwing all his weight forward, managed to actually pull Joseph off balance for a second. “When every moment all I can think about... all I see ... is what he’s done to her... what he’s going to do... what he’s...”

Anang suddenly filled the room. “What the devil is going on in here?” Everything went still. The three of them froze, looking up at her like three small boys caught fighting, never mind who started it. “We can hear you in the greenhouse,” she snapped. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the neighbours have called the police.”

Thomas sagged in their grip. They did not let go. His voice was ragged, choked. Days of impotent grief held in careful check finally tore its way out of him. “We saw Jonah drive off. Going to the Keys. She... she could be with him. Or there already. Taken by one of those two idiots. Or she’s ... she’s already... d... he’s already...”

“Don’t say it,” Hecuba snapped stepping out from behind Anang. Gaganan hissed from the dining room, having bolted when the fight began. “It’s not true. You know in your heart it’s not.”

“I don’t know *what* I know any more,” he sobbed. “Let me go,” he snapped, jerking his arm from Henry. Hesitant, Henry let him. Only after a glance at his wife, did Joseph do the same. Thomas sank onto the couch, elbows on his knees and head in his hands.

Anang drifted forward, slipped her fingers through his hair, let them rest on the

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crown of his head. “We know,” she said softly. She made a gesture to her husband with her free hand to start a kettle. “It has its toll. But you *mustn't* think of what is happening to her. You must not have those images in your mind if you are to be of any use to her after. She needs you strong. Those thoughts, those images weaken. You must be a warrior of the People now. Prepare for the hunt.”

He looked up at her, hope beginning to brim in eyes that were now mostly brown. “Y...you’ve found her?” he gasped.

Slowly, not wanting to tell him, not wanting to lie, she shook her head.

His heart retreated into his belly again. “What’s the...” he began, lowering his head once more.

Her fingers tightened in his hair, forced his head up. “We know where she is *not*. And that is anywhere but that two kilometre area. We also know...” she paused, making sure she had his attention, “that Jonah returned there Saturday morning and has not left since.”

Thomas’s blood ran hot and cold, his head spinning. “But... just we saw him...” he stammered, pointing to Henry. “We did. He... he waved a plane ticket... laughed, drove away, not... not twenty minutes ago!”

Hecuba crossed her arms, humphed. “He’s a right sneaky bastard, I’ll agree. But he’s a *charmer*, Thomas. Somehow what *you* saw was not what was real. Maybe the same way he fooled the professor.”

“But I can’t be fooled,” he choked. “I’m immune, remember? I can’t see glammers. If it wasn’t him, I’d have seen who it really was.”

“Only within a certain distance,” she countered. “Maybe... maybe outside that you see what others do, and only your aura negates it. I don’t know. But I’m telling you. He is still on that mountain, and has been since yesterday morning.”

“How... how can you be sure? Which... which is which?” he moaned, wanting to believe. Not daring to.

Anang gave a soft chuckle, “He may be able to fool human eyes, *Medicine Shield*, but he cannot fool the spirits.”

Thomas sighed, relenting. He sank against the back of the couch.

Seeing matters under control, Hecuba grabbed Henry’s arm and pulled him into the kitchen, sat him at the table. She turned his face up to hers, gently wiped a trickle of blood from his lip with her thumb, shook her head. “Got you good,” she clucked.

“Yeah, well, apparently I had it coming,” he chuckled.

Hecuba moved off, began getting things to tend the busted lip. Anang glanced over at him as she entered the kitchen, saw Hecuba wrapping an ice cube and pulled

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a jar out of a cabinet, handed it to her wordlessly.

Hecuba opened it, smelled the paste in the tiny jar and wrinkled her nose.

“It tastes better than it smells,” Anang said softly as she pulled down a single mug and began measuring herbs into a tea-ball. “Which is inevitable with a lip cut. It’ll reduce the swelling better than ice.” She poured an ounce of a golden syrup into the bottom of the cup which Hecuba doubted was honey.

She moved back to the table where Henry was pressing a cup of coffee against his face, sighing as the heat seeped into his injury. “That’s not going to help,” she said, taking it from him.

“Can I at least drink it?” he growled.

“In a minute. Tip back.”

He eyed her warily, slowly obeyed. “No hocus pocus,” he warned.

“If it heals you what do you care?” she snapped, dipping her forefinger into the paste and smearing it delicately on his lip.

“Ow,” he yelped.

“Hold still.”

“It stings,” he complained, wincing as she spread it.

“That means it’s working.”

The heat of his skin began to melt it quickly as she rubbed it in. “Gently!”

“This *is* gentle. When I get rough, you’ll know it,” she snapped.

“I’ll remember that.” He rolled his eyes, took a deep breath, trying to steel himself against the itching the cream was beginning to cause.

He tried to lean away from her, to avoid the finger prodding his bruised flesh. He couldn’t escape. He began to notice the body inches from his, could smell something more honey-like and pleasant, earthy, over the pungent ointment as it faded.

“It stinks,” he said, trying to divert his attention.

“What you get for rough-housing,” she said flatly.

“We weren’t rough-housing. We were trying to restrain the hot-head,” he ground. As if that reminded her, she began to check the rest of his head for other injuries. He found himself with his nose practically in her cleavage.

Feeling his breath just above the rise of her corset she looked down. His eyes were locked, a little wide. She popped the back of his head, pulling away and scowled at him.

“Hey!” he snapped, holding his head where she’d hit him. “You were the one who shoved my face in them. I’m a wounded man here!”

“Learn to duck,” she said curtly, busying herself with putting the lid on the jar

and wiping her finger on a napkin.

“Ha-ha.” He made a face at her.

They settled down as Anang bustled by, setting the steaming mug on the table and reached for the honey jar in the middle. “Don’t be too hard on him,” Anang said softly, nodding toward the living room as she stirred a generous portion of the honey into the cup. “He hasn’t slept since it happened. He was bound to lose it sooner or later.”

Henry leaned forward, cradled his coffee cup between his hands, gingerly pausing to touch his lip which did not feel nearly as swollen as it had been. “Have you...,” he lowered his voice, “made any progress at all?” he whispered.

Hecuba shook her head, nodded towards Anang, “Any chance I want some of that?”

Anang frowned. “Not unless you feel like playing Sleeping Beauty. There’s some of that raspberry rose and black tea infusion you liked so much in a tin on the counter. Help yourself. There’s still water in the kettle.” She disappeared into the living room with the mug in hand.

Henry looked over at Hecuba, watched her rise and begin making herself a cup of tea. “You haven’t been able to ‘see’ anything?”

She sighed, pouring the water. “The last time I actively scryed that man the results were somewhat... explosive.” She began to bob the tea-ball up and down in the cup, leaned her hip against the counter and watched Anang and Thomas in the living room.

“I don’t need any more of your ‘tea’, Anang,” Thomas was saying. Gaganan sat at his feet, watching intently, tail twitching. “I’m fine. I won’t... yell any more, promise. Or kick the couch. I’ll behave.”

“You think I’m giving you a choice. Drink,” she ordered.

Thomas sighed, took the cup from her. “You know, if the inspector shows up, he’s going to start suspecting *me* if I don’t show any emotion over this.”

“I’ll tell him I drugged you,” she snapped, turning away and returning to the kitchen. “Drink all of it,” she called over her shoulder. She paused at the back door. “Make sure he does,” she said to Hecuba. “I’ll be in the greenhouse if he doesn’t.”

They nodded and Anang left. Joseph disappeared into the back of the house again. Hecuba watched as Thomas reluctantly took a sip, made a face, began drinking it in earnest. She pulled the tea-ball out of her cup and emptied it, sat down next to Henry. She looked almost as worn out as he was.

“So... if you can’t... scry?” he asked, unsure of the word. When she nodded

he continued. "...him, how are you so sure he's there? How is your magic going to help?"

She sipped, thinking. "I... I have something of his, a letter he wrote..."

"Wait," he said, putting a hand on her arm. "How did you...? I thought she tore up the only one he gave her."

"Not the same letter. I stole this one from his professor."

"How..." his eyes went wide, deeply impressed. "How did you manage that?"

She grinned. "I have friends in the department. When I was working on the script for Goonagini I approached her for literary help with some of the research. She was happy to help. I was sitting in her office when some 'crisis' or another called her off." She chuckled. "A crisis my friends carefully arranged." Henry gave a low whistle of appreciation. "While she was gone, I rifled the file cabinet. Would you believe she has every scrap of everything he's ever done in her class? She doesn't have that for any of her other students. *And* most of it is real garbage. I found a 'love letter' he wrote for Nea... part of some..."

"Cyrano project," he finished, nodding. "Thomas was furious that day, especially when he found out Jonah'd not only stolen his letter but gave it to Nea."

She gave a laugh, "Nea was pretty upset herself. But there is power in this letter. It was written for the other person involved, it is in his actual handwriting, not typewritten." She grimaced, "Hell, I can even smell that cologne of his on it. With this, I might actually be able to pierce the veil that hides him."

"But you haven't used it yet?"

She shook her head. "I don't dare. ... it will be consumed when I do. So I've only got one shot. I just have this... feeling now is not the time to use it."

Henry stared out into the living room, thoughtful. Thomas was sitting numbly, elbows on his knees, cup cradled in his hands, staring blankly at the cat at his feet. Gaganan reached up and set a paw on the bottom of the cup, pushing up. Thomas obediently drank more.

"Can't you use the same technique to find her?" he asked suddenly.

She sighed. "I've tried. I've used some of her most favoured possessions in the ritual and still... nothing. She's... she's blocked differently. I don't know what he's done, but it's almost like she did not exist," she breathed.

Henry whispered, barely daring to speak the words. "Could that mean she's... dead?"

She shook her head, almost violently. "No. If that were the case this would work. And..." she held her breath, dared to say it. "If that were the case we'd have

heard from the Mainganoden. Anang says the Uktena would have let them know rather violently,” she shuddered. Suddenly, an idea exploded in her mind. “Goddess! Why didn’t I think of this before!” she exclaimed.

Just then, before Henry could ask, Anang came back into the kitchen, Princess writhing in her grasp. She held the snake out to Hecuba. Princess immediately slithered up her arm and around her shoulders, hissing at Anang. “She was getting into my Rattlesnake Fern.”

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have left her unattended,” she answered, began calming the serpent. “Listen, we were told about Nea’s connection to the Uktena...” Anang flinched. “But... couldn’t we use that? I mean, wouldn’t he *want* her found and protected?”

Anang paused, thinking hard. “You know, I’m not sure. He may be the one spirit strong enough to pierce that barrier. I’ll... I’ll ask.” She took something from a box on a shelf, glanced into the living room, then returned to the greenhouse with a new mission, an eagle feather in her hand.

Thomas was swaying. He stared at the cat’s eyes, watched the green and gold flickering like strobe lights until they were all one colour. His first taste of the greenish-brown tea was biting and almost foul. But the aftertaste had been sweet, nutty. He found himself compelled to drink more. The cat had sat there, overseeing the operation, pushing the cup at him if he slacked off. The animal’s purring was loud, echoing in his ears, rumbling in his head. The liquid was warm, not hot, and heated his blood as it went down, as if he had drunk pure whiskey instead of tea. Of course, there was no guarantee there *wasn’t* alcohol in it. It made him feel heavy, like his blood was turning to honey.

‘I can’t sleep,’ he thought. ‘I don’t want to dream. To think.... What right do I have to sleep when she’s... she’s... being...’ The cat tipped the cup again. He drank obediently.

His eyes were getting heavy. Something warm descended on his shoulders. He looked up, saw Joseph drop a pillow against the arm of the couch. “No,” he said, his voice slurred and heavy.

Joseph did not answer, walked away again.

Thomas looked down at the cat blinking at him. He could have sworn there was a grin on his face. “No,” he told him, shrugging off the blanket Joseph had draped on him. He tipped the cup back, but it was empty. He reached to set it on the table beside the couch, found himself pressing against the soft, feather pillow. He groaned, pushed away from it. Gaganan jumped up on him, pushing him back

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down easily with his paws. “Get off,” he complained, rolling onto his back. He had no strength left to force the issue.

The cat just grinned, laid down on his chest, purring, began to lick his forehead, that dip right between the brows at the bridge of the nose. The vibrations were hypnotic, penetrating to the core of his body. Soon, he wasn't sure if he wasn't the one purring. He began to hear a sound rushing in his ears... like water... a waterfall....

Hecuba stood over him, grinned, gave the cat a scratch on his neck. “You know your chakras,” she whispered. Gaganan looked up at her, winked. She pulled the blanket out from under Thomas's legs where he'd shrugged it off, began unfolding it. Henry stood at the end of the couch, pulled off his shoes. Between them, they tucked Thomas in, left him sleeping soundly with the cat curled up in the curve of him. In his sleep, Thomas reacted to the cat by wrapping up around him, hugging him to his body as he had done with Nea.

Henry ruffled the cat's ears. “Guess you're stuck, buddy,” he grinned.

They started to return to the kitchen when Henry grabbed Hecuba's arm and held her back. Princess raised her head, stuck her tongue out at him. He let go quickly. “Listen...” He rubbed the back of his neck, a little embarrassed. “I... we... we were in the middle of packing up when... it happened. We have to be out of the dorm by tonight. I've got til eight to turn in our keys. With all this... side tracking and him out cold...”

She suppressed a grin. “Yes?”

Damn her for making him say it, he thought. “Would you help me? It shouldn't take too long with your help. And you can see the apartment. You and Julia are welcome to crash there if you need to. If you're staying...”

She gave a snort. “Of course we're staying. Julia's cashing in her ticket as we speak. But yeah, I'll help. Let me go tell Anang.”

Henry nodded and turned back to his friend, pulled back the corner of the blanket over his hip. He gritted his teeth and reached into the pocket, fishing for Thomas's keys. He ended up pulling the pocket inside out, dropping some change into the cushions. He nearly jumped out of his skin when Joseph spoke.

“Don't worry about it. The couch takes its offerings as it sees fit,” he chuckled. Henry looked up and saw him leaning against the wall in the hallway, watching. “It'll spit them back out when they're needed. Always does.”

“I need his key,” he said feebly, began twisting the right one off the ring, slipped it into his own pocket. He set the rest of the keys on the table next to the

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empty mug. “He’ll... be alright...”

Joseph nodded. “Been waiting for this, actually. Surprised it came this early, but...” he shrugged. “There was a catalyst. Best that it did. Now we can make him sleep and make him eat.”

“You want him to stay here, or can he crash at the apartment eventually?” he asked, began patting his pockets down looking for his own keys.

“He’ll go where he’ll go. Can’t force that. But he’s welcome here. You all are.” He observed Henry a moment while they waited for Hecuba, watched the frustrated expression as he remembered he had dropped the keys outside. “Everything happens for a reason, Henry. The Spirit *moves*. Nothing we can do about it but enjoy the dance, eh?”

“If you say so, Mr. Redbird,” Henry answered, confused.

Joseph just chuckled and headed to the back of the house.



Hecuba did not say much on the way to the dorm. Just leaned her head on the window and watched the streets go by, caressing the snake without thinking about it. He parked the car in the pit and they walked the few blocks to Cather. “When we get the last of it packed and ready to go down I’ll bring the car around to the back door,” he said. She just nodded. Entering the dorm, it was easy to see why. The area around the doorway was crowded with cars vying for a turn to load up.

They got into the elevator. No one said anything as she stepped out onto the floor, though she got a few whistles. Henry led her down the hall to the room, muttering something about ‘never mind the smell’, and opened the door for her. The floor had that odour particular to men’s dorms, especially with the mouldy green shag carpet that lined the hall.

The room itself was a bit of fresh air. It was tight, only slightly larger than the rooms at Randall, but at least here there was an elevator. In spite of being the cheapest dorm on campus it was far more modern, though it felt much more run down. A wind-chime carved from sandalwood was hung from the air vent, covering the slight mildewy fragrance that pervaded the floor.

They were half packed. Several boxes were already stacked by the door, empty ones piled on the beds. Thomas’s drawers were all open and empty, as were half of Henry’s, but there were still books on the desk, stationary things in the desk

drawers. Henry handed her a box, pointed to the desk. "You can start there if you like."

He pulled a Leatherman out of his hip pocket, flipping it open to the pliers and began climbing up onto furniture to take down the strings that criss-crossed the room a half metre from the ceiling, tossing the clothes-pins that were on them into a box on his own desk.

They worked in silence, occasionally helping each other with the heavier things. He held up one end of the desk as she crawled beneath to get things that had fallen behind it. She held open the box for his light-box as he slid it home. Neither of them paid attention to the darkness growing outside the windows. Finally they were done. All that remained was to strip the beds and tape the boxes.

Henry grabbed a couple light ones and headed out. "I'm going to get the car. Just hang out here 'til I get back, then start bringing them down. The door will lock on you if you leave, so..."

"Stay put. Got it, fuzzy," she answered, giving him a thumbs up as she taped a box closed, crossed out what had been previously written on it and writing what was currently inside.

He closed the door behind him.

She set the box on the stacks and started on the beds. As she pulled the threadbare quilt from Thomas's, she disturbed Princess, who had nestled down between it and the pillow. The snake complained, and headed off to find another place to nap. Hecuba paid no attention, having already confirmed there was no where for her to go that she couldn't retrieve her from. The vents were in the ceiling. She finished Thomas's bed, packing the pillow in the box last, checking each time she put something in to make sure Princess had not crawled inside. She moved to Henry's. She was just snapping out the sheet to fold it when she heard the waste basket tip over.

She turned, dropped the sheet, caught the empty soda bottle that had spun towards her feet. "Princess!" she complained, loosened her corset and picking the serpent up. "You are just into everything today," she said to her, holding the snake before her face. The tongue flicked across her nose. "I know. You sense something is not right. It's OK. Come to mamma," she purred, began feeding the snake down the front of her blouse. "I'll keep you warm."

Princess happily slid under her breast, slithering into a comfortable position that was snug and warm.

Hecuba sighed, shifting herself so she wouldn't put too much pressure on her

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when she bent over, then began to pick up the trash. It was mostly old photos, proof-sheets, class notes no longer needed, and some health food wrappers. There was, however, the occasional junk food cellophane. She chuckled, putting them back.

She lingered over some of the proof sheets, a spectacular sunset having caught her eye. She had to admire the work. Henry was an artist. The pictures on the proof sheets were small, barely an inch, but she could see he had a real eye for composition. He had quite a few of people, candidly mostly: people at rest, playing or lounging on the Green, several of Riti and Roma dancing in the grass, all of them good. His landscapes were no less stirring. There was even one of a single tree which, as far as she could tell, squinting at it, had a lone branch that pointed down into the valley below it, like a skeletal hand pointing the way. There was a whole sheet of a mountain side just above the red belt, where the Chinooks would kill off the leaves with the flip-flopping weather conditions. She was just about to toss it in with the others when something off in one of the shots caught her eye. In the midst of the brilliant green was a flash of silver.

She peered closer, holding it up to the light. There was no road she could see in the picture but there was undeniably a car there. She looked up, began to glance over the stack of boxes. She laid the picture on the bed and pulled the top two off, ripping the tape off the third and digging through the contents for the photo magnifier she had seen Henry put in it. She was pulling out the light box when she heard the key in the door.

“We’re ready to... What are you doing?” Henry asked, stopping in the doorway just as she plugged the box in and slapped the proof sheet onto it.

“I think I saw something,” she said, grabbing the magnifier and setting it on the picture, looking through it.

“What?” he said, closing the door. He frowned at the opened box and the trash she had not gotten to yet.

Hecuba looked up at him, her eyes wide and bright. She pointed out a picture. “Do you have this one printed? Larger?”

He glanced at it, shook his head. “No. That one was ruined. I had everything perfect. The angle just right for the lighting. You couldn’t even see the road. I even had this magnificent Red-tailed Hawk in the tree there, clear as crystal. Then this damned car drove by and before I could snap again the bird flew off.”

Her excitement grew. “Do you know where this is? Do you remember exactly?”

He shrugged, “Yeah, I guess. Why? It’s just a ruined picture.”

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“Because it’s Jonah’s car!” she exclaimed. “I’m sure of it! I think I can even tell you when you took this. It was the weekend they showed Star Wars on the Green.”

“It was.” He frowned. “How’d you...?”

She made him look at it through the glass. “See that black mark on the front fender?”

“Barely,” he breathed.

“It happened the afternoon he left. I saw it happen. Some one backed out in front of him as he was leaving and he nicked the post trying to avoid them. It left a streak of black paint and a slight dent. He was furious. Next time I saw his car, about a week later, it was fixed.”

She was more animated than he had ever seen her, positively bubbling over.

“Ok. I’ll give you that, but how is that going to help?”

She shook her head, frustrated that he didn’t get it. “We were talking about it that afternoon. Weren’t you listening?” She thought about it for half a second. “Right, you weren’t there yet. The Kumar sisters have kind of had their eyes on Jonah for a while, they live in the same dorm. They were telling us he takes off like that nearly every weekend. Maybe he went to the same place every time? Wherever he was that weekend, you got a picture of him going.”

“Coming back,” he corrected, kneeling next to her and peering at the picture again. “I took that one on Sunday afternoon. One of my last before hiking out of there.” He sat back on his heels. “If he went to the same place every weekend, it stands to reason that’s where he’s got her hidden. This photo is in that two kilometre area... deep in it. In fact... I think I caught the tip of a building out there in one of these,” he mumbled, glancing over the rest of the thumbnails on the proof-sheet. “We’ll need the rest of this series. With them I might be able to suss out which road this is and narrow down our search.”

He got up, began rummaging through a different box, made sure he had everything in it he would need, adding the proof-sheet they had been looking at. Then closed it and set it on the unmade bed. He held out a hand to her to help her off the floor. “All right, we finish up here, get everything into the van, but we put this one in the front. Then we head over to the dark room. If we’re lucky they haven’t locked it up. We’ll figure this out soon enough.”

She let him help her up. “Sounds like a plan.”

“What... what is wrong with your corset?” he asked, suddenly noticing the odd bulge.

She chuckled, moved to start stuffing the rest of the trash into the basket.

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“Princess was getting into trouble.”

“Oh.” He seemed a little unnerved. He began ripping the bedding off his billet and shoving them into the box where his blanket was already neatly folded. “How did you find that anyway?” he asked.

“Princess getting into trouble,” she repeated. “She knocked over the basket. I noticed it when I sorted through the rubbish. You do good work.”

He felt a bit of heat rising on his neck. “So do you. I was told you put together most of that last play, story and all.”

Now it was her turn to flush. “I had help. But I did pass the class.” She grabbed the first two boxes. “I’ll stack these by the elevator. You bring the rest, I’ll guard, then we’ll slide them in and tag team them down.”

“Good plan. Gotta guard everything around here.”



Thirty minutes later they were in the dark room in the basement of the media building developing the photos Henry needed. He showed Hecuba what to do to speed the process up. While they worked he dared to ask a question that had been eating at him all afternoon. “How come you don’t have piercings and tattoos like most Goths?”

She paused in pulling the first photo out of the film conditioner. She glanced over her shoulder at him. He had his back to her, as if afraid to look. She pulled the photo out and hung it on the line to dry. “Who says I don’t?” she evaded, trying to hide a grin.

He shrugged. “Ok, not obvious ones, like the tongue and brows,” he admitted, stole a sideways glance at her as she moved the next shot from the fixer into the rinse. She did not look hostile so he continued. He remembered the red-brown snake coiling out of her corset the day he’d met her. “You play with henna, but somehow you don’t seem the tattoo type.”

She decided to answer. “I’m not a true Goth. They’d rather be sacking Rome anyway,” she chuckled. “And I’m just not into ‘sacking’. I’m a witch. I just like the Gothic sense of style. I’m comfortable in it,” she added with a shrug, muttered something about being more of a hippie-chick anyway.

He laughed. “What?”

She blushed. “I said hippie-chick. You know, the whole Stevie Nicks/Gypsy thing. It makes me feel... feminine. As for the other, my body is a temple. I do not

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believe in permanent alterations. I don't even have my ears pierced."

"I had noticed," he nodded, sliding another photo into the stop bath. "Pull that other one out for me will you? It's ready. So, are men allowed to worship in that temple or are you more the Diana type?" he said, trying to casually slip in the question, praying it wouldn't set her off again.

She looked at him. He kept his eyes on the paper in front of him, concentrating a little too hard on resizing the image. She wasn't sure how she felt about his asking. She decided on the safe answer. "I don't think the doors are closed to anyone based on sex alone. It's a ...case by case thing. Both have been at that altar at some point." This last she said without looking at him, tending to the photograph he'd asked her to. She wasn't sure how he would react to her non-virginity or why it bothered her to think it might bother him. She told herself it didn't matter what he thought. But it didn't change the heat beginning to build in the vicinity of the 'altar' in question.

"So it's just *me* you hate" he nodded, seemed to accept the fact.

She smiled. "Now, did I say that, fuzzy?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE:

Reaching

Nea shivered, but it was not from cold. She heard something, a soft scraping swish like boiled leather on stone, followed by a tick-scrape and a shhhhhhktschhhhhk noise as if someone were dragging an antler across a brick wall. There were other sounds in the distance, fluttering and squeaking like a flock of bats but far more sinister.

She felt something descend on the bed, something long and heavy. It slid against her ankle and pressed against her still flesh, pushing as it roamed towards her ribs. There it rose, paused, then crossed. The weight on her chest was enormous. She could not open her eyes, could not see it, but she could feel its breath on her face, like puffs of icy air in a stale room. She could hear it, feel every breath it took, felt the massive chest expand and contract, exerting more pressure on her with each breath.

The squeaks came nearer. There were other sounds, like voices whispering just out of earshot and a high pitched scream like a tea-kettle that devolved into hideous laughter. The fluttering mass dove at her, swooped down and away repeatedly, chattering unintelligibly. She struggled, flailing her arms to ward them off, pushed at the thing on her chest. Then, like an eagle striking the water to snare a fish, one of the fluttering things struck her body and flew off, snapping off what felt like a piece of her soul as it went. She screamed Gaganan's name. The thing on her chest laughed, adjusted. Scaled claws pressed on her wrists, holding her down, and the weight became almost unbearable. Others dove and snapped, some taking away bits

of something that left her cold and empty.

The thing on her chest placed its muzzle over her heart, bared sharp teeth the width of her hand and began to press through her as if her flesh and ribs offered no more resistance than water. He was bobbing for her heart as a child would for an apple at Halloween. She could not breathe.

Suddenly the earth began to shake, a loud bellow of a different sort scattered the fluttering things which flew off fighting over the stolen bits. There was a sharp pain across her face that seemed to come from another world. There was a burning in her wrists, where the claws held her. They suddenly let go as if they had been burned, the thing on her chest rearing back. It roared in rage and frustration. Nea's eyes snapped open.

Jonah was straddling her hips, shaking her violently, panic on his face. She drew a single, deep breath, began to cough. He deflated in relief, slid to the side of her, pulling the sheet across his naked body. He took her face in his hand, almost gentle, turned her to face him as she gasped. "Are you all right? What happened?"

She shoved him away, pushed herself out of the bed, snatching up the coverlet to provide warmth and modesty to her naked body. "What happened?" she snapped, scathingly. "You tell me what happened!"

He watched her. She was still trembling all over, and not in fear of him. There was something she feared more than him. "You... you hit me, in your sleep. Fighting something called Gagnan."

She snorted. "I was *calling* Gaganan to rescue me," she corrected.

He sneered. "Is that Harlan's Indian name?" he spat.

She laughed. "Hardly. His Indian name is Memaun..." she stopped herself. "But you do not deserve to know that. What else happened?"

"You stopped breathing. I think your heart actually stopped. It was racing so fast eventually it sounded like no beats at all. I shook you, finally slapped you and you took a breath. I commanded you to wake up." He narrowed his eyes, studied her. She turned away from him, sat down on the floor against the wall. She visibly shuddered. "I saved your life, didn't I?" he said, swinging his legs off her side of the bed, kept the sheet across his lap.

Her eyes snapped to his, bored into him. "It was your fault it was necessary!"

"Hey, I had nothing to do with that... whatever... what *was* that? I felt..."

She watched him, caught the faint twitch of the bare chest muscles. His skin was crawling. She gave him an evil grin of realization. "You felt it," she crowed. "Good. Maybe it'll come after you next. Maybe I can bargain with it."

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He scowled at her. “Bargain with what?” he demanded. If there was a force of power present that he might be able to utilize...

She laughed. The sound was not her normal, warm, almost musical expression of joy. It was hollow and cold. “You should know. You locked me in here with it.”

He tried another question. “If *it* wasn’t this Gagnon, what is?”

“Gaganan is my cat,” she snapped, looking away. “And he’s the only one who can keep them at bay.”

“Keep what?”

She sighed. “The maji-manidoo. The evil spirits that dwell in the deep dark places and feast upon the souls of the living until they become like them. They’ve haunted me since early childhood. We don’t know why. Gaganan was given to me to keep them off me while I sleep.”

“Then they do not haunt you while you’re awake?” His mind was whirring. Something was not adding up.

“No. They only come at me when I sleep, when I dream... at night. Brother Sun keeps them trapped in the dark places, they fear him. But you don’t really care about all this,” she said shrewdly, watching his almost blank expression. “All you care about is that they nearly took me from you.”

He looked up, as if suddenly realizing she had said something. “No... No, it’s not that. It’s just... we swept all spirits from this place.”

“They come back,” she snapped, looking at him as if he were a complete idiot.

He shook his head. “It is you who do not understand. The Master guessed that your powers might enable you to call upon nature spirits, not knowing the true details of your abilities. He decided to take no chances, legends being what they are. We went through great expense and effort over the holidays to swept the area clean and lock it down. No spirit can get in.”

She just laughed at him. “That means you’ve had months to create new ones. Ones far more suited to your natures: vile and corrupt. It explains the serpent-like feel of the big one. It was new.”

“We don’t create spi...”

She cut him off. “Oh yes, you do!” she snarled. The bracelets flared, though she did not get up. “Maji are easy to make. They spring up wherever there is corruption and stagnation. In places where factories pollute the waters and the air, they create choking spirits that strangle all life. Abattoirs have their own stink, their own spirits. Places where dark magic is practised... there are dark owls in abundance. When you call a spirit, it does not matter what barriers *you* put up. They

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can come because you invited them. You have summoned them and laid me upon the table with an apple in my mouth and no means to call spirits of my own to ward them off!" she growled, raising her voice and the bracelets.

Jonah sat silent, thinking. There was apparently much about magic he did not understand. He began to wonder if it was too soon for his plans, but then he remembered, the Master had not known either. This was a different sort of magic. Something he had felt was incredibly powerful and must possess. But it was also something the Master could not teach him to use, and finding an Indian willing to instruct him in the ways of a power stolen from his own people... that would be very difficult. More work than was necessary. Oh, eventually he might put her through the Crucible, when he had tired of her, learned what he wanted to know. But first she would teach him all about these spirits and how her people harnessed them. Of course, if the Master learned as well, there was every possibility he would have one watching him at all times. He would never have another chance.

Somehow though, he would have to find a way to hold these things at bay. He could not keep her from sleeping for the long months he would need her for. But wait... she had slept almost a day and a half when he brought her here, from the moment he had put her to sleep in the glade til the moment he commanded her to wake. Nothing had attacked her then, nothing tried to kill her. He said as much. "Explain that."

She sighed. "I do not remember the sleep."

"So?" he scowled.

"So there were likely no dreams, therefore not a real sleep. There was no avenue for them to reach me," she answered dully.

"So if I just keep you from dreaming..." he began.

"I'll go mad. Every one knows that. And you want to be a doctor? If you cannot dream you slowly go mad, psychotic."

He mused on that. 'I can live with that', he thought. 'Maybe even stave it off with the occasional monitored natural sleep? It would take preparation though... a lot of it. Perhaps the books would hold a more localized, temporary fix.'

A sound in the room snapped him out of his plotting. He looked up at her. "What was that?"

She looked away from him, refusing to answer. She did not have to. Her stomach growled again.

He got off the bed, picked his pants up off the floor, pulled them on. "Of course. You have not eaten. I will bring you breakfast." He grabbed his shirt. "Get

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dressed,” he ordered. “The Master may chose to come down here, and if he does, I do not want your body to tempt him. You will soon discover I am not the kind of person who likes to share.” With that he strode out of the room.

She glared down at her stomach. “Traitor.” It merely growled back at her.



It was nearly nine o'clock when Hecuba and Henry finally returned to the Redbirds'. Anang, Joseph and Julia were sitting down to a late dinner, apparently having waited as long as they were going to. There were two extra places set. Thomas was still sound asleep on the couch, with Gaganan having his dinner on the coffee table nearby. The ferret was across from him, nibbling on a plate of her own. Both of them had chicken. From the table arrangement, it did not look as if Anang expected Thomas to join them.

The two of them sat down, unable to suppress their excitement. Food was pressed on them, set on their plates while they explained what they had discovered. Julia watched them, wide-eyed. They were both talking and eating in turns, interrupting and finishing sentences for each other as smoothly as if it had been rehearsed that way. When Hecuba reached for a slice of the fry-bread, she set another on his plate without even thinking about what she was doing. If he refilled his tea glass from the pitcher, he topped her off. As a result of taking all this in, Julia absorbed very little of what was actually said. She blinked, began tuning Anang in when Hecuba nudged her.

“We'll lay them out in the greenhouse,” she was saying. “I have a table big enough. We might be able to figure out what section of what road that is.”

“That was the thought,” Henry said. “And to think we owe it all to the snake.”

Hecuba fidgeted at a movement in her bodice. “Speaking of whom, I think I need to feed her.”

“Did ya bring anything?” Julia asked. “I mean... would she eat chicken if ya gave her a strip a' meat?”

Hecuba laughed. “No. She prefers mice. I'll have to go to a pet-store in the morning. Better put her in her tank. Don't want her going hunting,” she commented, glancing at the ferret who was now sitting beside Julia's chair on her hind-legs, chittering and begging for more.

Julia gasped, snatched up Lulabelle, tucking her safely against her chest. The ferret just kept reaching for Julia's plate, squirming to be free. “She wouldn't... I

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mean... she couldn't! She's not big enough!"

Hecuba chuckled. "I wouldn't let her, cause she might get hurt in the process but... you'd be amazed at what she can swallow."

"How about an egg?" Joseph offered. "I'm sure we can sacrifice one or two to the scaled heroine."

"That might be ok," she answered, thinking about it.

There was a light cough from the floor. They looked down. Gaganan was looking up at her with a purposeful gleam in his eye. He opened his mouth a couple times, as if he were trying to lick peanut butter from the roof of his mouth, or trying to be silently sarcastic. Julia peeled a strip of meat off her chicken, held it out to him. Lulabelle squeaked indignantly, reaching for it. Gaganan glanced at the meat then ignored it. Finally she gave it to the ferret.

Hecuba frowned. "What, you want to feed Princess?"

He nodded.

Henry just stared, still not used to the almost human mannerisms of the cat.

"Would you be willing to hunt a mouse for her?" Hecuba asked him. Again the cat nodded. She reached down and stroked his ears. "I would appreciate it. Thank you. And... it'll give you something to keep you occupied." He gave her a cocked look that seemed to say, 'well, there is that, too.'

Anang stood. "If we're finished? I'll get these in the sink and meet you out there. Go set up the map and the pictures."

Joseph started to take the plates from her. "Let me..."

She held them out of his reach, shoved him away with her hip. "You are the tracker. You know this sort of thing better than me. I'll be out there at the point where I can be useful."

They got up, Julia moving to help with the dishes. Anang started to refuse her, but Julia sighed. "Look, I got to be useful *somehow*. Otherwise I might as well go home."

Anang relented.

"Say, Anang," Hecuba began as Henry grabbed the bag with the photos in it. "Did you ever get an answer on Uktena?"

Anang slid the rest of the frybread into a plastic bag, ran it through one of those 'suck-n-seal' devices to pull all the air out. She shook her head. "Eagle said no. While it would be a feasible thing for Him, the greater spirits feel it would stretch Him too thin, weaken Him to use so much of Himself across this kind of distance. They feel the risk to Him is too great. He is restless, however, dreaming they

suppose. Should He wake and act on His own that is different. But they will not ask Him, nor will they allow us to do so. If *she* calls..." she shrugged. "He kind of left that hanging. Besides," she added with a grin as she closed the refrigerator. "He said that Snake had already provided. Now I know what he meant."

By the time Anang and Julia finally came out into the greenhouse, Henry had laid out the large photos so that they made one giant conglomerate picture of the mountainside. Joseph had a map next to it and they were referencing from one to the other. Hecuba came out of the back as Anang and Julia set down the tray of glasses and a pitcher of fresh tea, held up a roll of thick, clear plastic. "Can we borrow this?" she asked.

Anang frowned. "I use that to cover my plants. You can't cut it."

Hecuba nodded, setting it on the table and rolling it out over the photos. "Don't need to."

Henry yelped. "Hey, what are you..."

She didn't listen, went to her purse and pulled out a dry erase marker, set it on the covered photos. "Ok, now we can draw the roads on the pictures. It'll help." She looked over her shoulder at Anang. "Don't worry, it'll wipe off."

The guys actually found it a useful idea, plus it prevented them from jostling the conglomerate so much.

Hecuba helped herself to a glass of tea, and watched them trying to match things up, slivers of road on the pictures to guessing where the spire fit in. She heard a thump onto the end of the table she was leaning on, looked over to see Gaganan walking along it, nimbly avoiding potted plants, headed for the snake's tank. He had a little brown mouse in his mouth that was moving weakly. She walked over and lifted the lid for him, and watched him drop it into the bedding near Princess. She resettled the lid, then reached over to rub the cat's fur, thanking him.

Over the table a disagreement had begun over which road was which and whether the car was before or after a particular branch. Hecuba sighed, drifted over to help handle it.

"Alright, forget where the blasted car is... where is this house you mentioned, Fuzzy? You were never able to fit the pic with the spire into the whole here," she snapped.

They sighed. "She's right. I'm certain that house is where she's at," Joseph said.

Henry frowned. "We can't be sure of that. There are at least a dozen houses and cabins out there. I think we run too great a risk assuming they're in the only one we have a glimpse of."

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Hecuba shook her head. "It fits. It fits into his... sense of style, I guess?"

"Not really," Henry muttered. He'd known the ass longer.

"Anyway, my intuition tells me that spire is the tip of the proverbial iceberg. That's where she is. We just have to find that house," she insisted.

Henry looked up at her from under a fringe of curly hair. "Witch's Intuition, huh? That more powerful than the ordinary Women's Intuition?"

Hecuba glared at him, not certain how he meant it. "Usually," she answered carefully. "You have Instinct. We have Intuition."

"Ain't they the same thing?" Julia asked, getting a little tired of the arguing.

The two of them glanced over at her, and started laughing, shaking their heads and both answered with a resounding "No."

Gaganan had noticed something. He looked up from watching the snake swallowing her dinner and scanned the transparent rafters. Finding what he was looking for, he hopped off the one table, crossed under the potting table they were using and onto the one on the opposite wall. He carefully threaded his way around potted plants and herbs to where Anang was misting an orchid, put a paw on her shoulder. When she looked at him, he directed her attention to the rafter with his other paw.

She nodded silently, her eyes glittering as she saw the eagle spirit perched in the air watching everything with interest. It turned its head to her as she looked up, nodded to her. It seemed to have been waiting for this, spoke to her. *What do you seek? I know that ridge well. Before I was driven out.*

She replied in the quiet, almost inarticulate spirit-speech. *A house with a tall spire. This house,* she said, holding up the lone picture with the image of the lance-like building jutting out above the tree-line.

I know that place. I have not been welcome there a long time.

Gaganan chattered a question. *How long?*

The eagle cocked his head at the cat. *Unlike you, Nijū Manidoo, I have not been so touched by man that I can weigh time so. Be more specific. Think like a cat.*

Gaganan closed his eyes for a second, duly chastened. *Forgive me, Eagle. Was it long before the territory was sealed against you?*

Yes.

More than a season?

Yes. More than a turning of seasons. It was the spring that snow fell near summer. Beyond that I cannot tell you.

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He nodded. *I was not here for that.*

Three years ago, said Anang. *Thank you. Have you seen who dwells in that aerie?*

A nasty human. Owl's man. Dark owls flock to him, but he has blindly driven even them out. He clings to the dark ways. I have not seen him directly, only what I have been told. I do not wish to see him. I have seen what that does to those who do. They come away... touched. There is something not right about him. Why do you seek this man and this place?

We think he has the Speaker, she said.

The yellow viper has the Speaker, he corrected.

What you have said leads me to believe that this dark man is the teacher of the yellow viper, she replied patiently.

The head cocked again. *I will ask,* he said finally. *I will find the Horned Owl and the Twisted Titmouse that once lived there.* He started to turn and fly away, but her chirrup called him back. *Yes?*

Forgive, please, but... can you show us, on the map where this is?

 she asked him.

He looked down at the table, tilted his head the other way. *The snow bark with the odd markings is a man thing. It makes no sense to me.* Anang sighed, hung her head in disappointment. *However...*

 Both her and the cat looked up sharply. *The other... the other is almost as I see it.*

The others had taken note of Anang and Gaganan's conversation with the ceiling and had fallen silent, watching. Only two of them knew what she was doing, neither of which could clearly see the thing, and only Hecuba could sense it at all. Suddenly, Hecuba jumped back, bumping into Henry, before she realized she had even reacted. She got herself under control quickly and moved closer, watching the bright point moving about the table.

Anang picked the cat up and transferred him to the potting table, both of them watching the spirit intently. Anang held out her hand for the marker.

The eagle walked around the photos under the plastic, looking it over intently, ignoring the thin black lines that had been traced over it. There were small gaps here and there. Henry had not actually taken photos of every inch of that slope. *The four in one oak is here,* the eagle mused, peering at a spot a few photos from the southern edge. *I can just see the top. The dark man is but a glide north of that... Here,* he said, touching an empty spot with his wing tip.

Anang pounced with the marker, making a circle on the plastic. She also made a

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notation of the four-in-one oak by drawing four lines that were pinched together in the middle. *Thank you, great spirit. With this we may find our Speaker yet,* she breathed, picking a blade of deer tongue from its pot and setting it before him.

Good. ...May I have another? he asked, seemed almost embarrassed. *It will help loosen the Horned Owl's tongue. He has become... corrupt, but he has the answers we seek.*

Anang quickly and gladly plucked two more. *Here, if bribery helps, then by all means.*

Henry took a sharp breath as the three silvery-green blades vanished before his eyes. He thought he actually felt the breeze of a wing's passing on his face, but convinced himself he'd imagined it.

Joseph watched his reaction, and chuckled. "Someone needs some sensitivity training."

"Hey," Henry snapped, realizing he was the one being referred to. "I may not be the most politically correct person in the room...."

Hecuba elbowed him. "Not that kind of sensitivity."

He frowned. "What other kind is there?" he asked, rubbing his ribs.

Julia giggled.

Anang patted Hecuba's shoulder. "Got your work cut out for you, hon."

Joseph suppressed his grin at Henry's blank, confused look, nodded his head to the circle and the four lines on the photo mat. "So what did the spirit say?"

"The eagle spirit who dwells on that slope has seen a man he describes as a black magician who lives in that house. Eagle is not welcome there, and all spirits who have laid eyes on him have been twisted somehow, corrupted. The man has been there three years," she added pointedly.

"So, what are ya'll sayin'?" asked Julia, frowning. "Jonah's workin' with someone? Doesn't sound like him."

"He had to learn somewhere," Joseph suggested.

"Thomas and I have known Jonah for a while," began Henry, folding his arms over his chest. "I ran into him my first semester, before I met Thomas and he... wasn't so... God, I don't know how to describe it."

"Creepy?" Julia offered.

"So lucky, if you get my drift," he decided. "I came in for winter term and he was snide and acid and not so smooth with the ladies. He always had Tolby and Coleman though. Fortunately I only had one class with him and few run-ins. Thomas wasn't so lucky. When Jonah came back in the fall he was changed. A lot like you know him. There was a third crony, an older student who, if you ask me,

had something of a private crush on Jack-ass-obi, but he graduated last year. The timing of this ‘dark man’ would be about right. It does provide reasonable suspicion.” He thought hard, glanced up at Anang. “Did you ask if he’d ever seen Jonah up there?”

She nodded. “He’s checking with some of the other residents. There is this horned owl that apparently used to live very close. Either way, Eagle said the house with the spire,” she began, picking up the photo and sliding it under the plastic under the circle she had drawn, “is here.”

“What’s this?” Hecuba asked, pointing to the four lines.

“He gave me a land-mark. Said the four in one oak, which I’m assuming is four oaks grown together as one, is just a ‘glide’ south of the house. So if we chance to find that tree, we turn immediately north.”

Henry sighed, setting his hands on the edge of the table and leaning forward. “Now if only we could translate this onto the blasted map.”

“GPS.”

They looked at Julia. “What?” Anang asked.

“GPS,” she said again. “Global Positionin’ System. Ok. Henry, you know where you were when you took that photo?” she asked, pointing to the one with the spire.

He shook his head. “Not clearly. I didn’t even know I had it in the shot ‘til I was in the dark room.”

She pointed to the one with the car, somewhere in the centre. “But you know where you were when you took this one, right?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, then. What we do is get a car with a GPS, send them with a map along the roads on that slope or as close as we can guess to where we want to be. We send someone to the place you took the picture and watch for the car. When we see it, we phone or radio the car, have them stop and figger out where they are. Then we kin figger out where the house is from there,” she shrugged.

“Excellent idea,” said Joseph. “But where are we going to get a car with a GPS? They’re expensive.”

She blew dismissively, “I’ll rent one. They had ‘em at th’ airport. All we’d need then is a couple a cell phones or walkie talkies.”

“Those aren’t cheap,” Henry frowned. “Even the ones that you pay as you go.”

Now it was Joseph’s turn to grin. “Leave them to me. I have a friend in the department who’ll loan me his radios. He does a lot of volunteer work with the Park Service. Ok, we can’t do this before morning, so, let’s get some sleep. Julia,

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when we get inside you call and reserve us a car for the morning. They should be open 24/7.”

“Will do,” she chirped.

“I’ll walk over to Phillip’s and see if he’s still up, get the radios. We’ll need a second map though. Anang, honey, could you get a trottable lunch together for us in time? Likely we’ll be eating on the go. Have no idea how long it’ll take.”

She nodded. “But don’t expect a ‘trottable’ breakfast. Thomas is going to be ravenous when he wakes up and you’ll need a good one under your belts. Now, it’s late. If you’re not supposed to be asking someone for something get to bed, all of you,” she snapped and began shooing everyone out of the greenhouse. Joseph started to pick up the map and the plastic covering the photos, but Anang popped him, grabbed his arm and began shoving him out the door. “It’ll keep, Joe. Phillip won’t be awake all night.”



Jonah came into the room to collect the tray as Nea was coming out of the shower. She looked up from towelling her hair, glared at him. She was already dressed. He kept his disappointment to himself. On the other hand, it amused him to think of the lengths she was going to deny him.

She walked to the dressing table for a brush, draped the damp towel over her shoulders for warmth. “Nice of you to go through all the trouble of boning the chicken for me,” she said sarcastically.

He chuckled. “What, and give you a weapon, however flimsy? How was your shower?” he said amiably, crossing his arms and leaning his shoulder against the wall to watch her brush out her hair.

“Cold.”

He frowned. “No hot water?” he asked, concerned, saw her shiver.

“I didn’t want any. I’m trying to stay awake,” she snapped, almost ripping the brush through her hair. The bristles did not have time to bite into the strands, merely skimming off the outer layer, leaving the few tangles intact. She growled, forced herself to slow down. Without the right shampoos, her hair was nearly unmanageable.

“Oh. I’ve fixed that,” he said. “That’s what took so long. I’ve reinforced the protections over this room. They will not bother you again.”

She just humphed and concentrated on her hair.

“Rosamund,” he began with what almost sounded like true concern.

She cut him off, throwing the brush at him. “Don’t call me that!” she shrieked as he dodged it. “And while we’re at it, don’t pretend we’re ‘a couple’. Don’t behave as though I’m going to come around any day now, or that we’re anything but what we are: Kidnapper and Captive! And not like in these filthy books, either,” she added, lunging for the romance novels and throwing them too. “You’re not going to Stockholm *me*, you rotten bastard!”

Something caught his eye as she turned on him, in between dodging missiles. He waved his hand in her direction, as if swatting away a fly and her arms went to her sides, though she struggled to move them. As an added measure as he stalked towards her, eyes riveted to what he’d seen, he bound her legs as well. When he reached her, his hand went to her hair, grabbed the silver lock. He felt the difference instantly, eyes wide. He pulled it around to show it to her. “What happened to your hair? How did you do this?”

From the look on his face, he wasn’t sure if he was amazed or upset. She hadn’t noticed the bright streak. She had avoided looking in the mirror. “You happened to it,” she snapped.

“What do you mean?”

Several things ran through her mind to tell him, some of them even the truth. An idea began to formulate in her mind, a way to perhaps get him to alert Uktena for her if she could get that lock into the moonlight. She was afraid of the beast, of what it would require of her, but she was somehow certain that He would not tolerate her in the possession of another wonder worker, especially one who would never let her return to His lands. “I hide it. Keep it magically dyed. When you took me away from my medicine bag and my ring, you broke the binding. It finally washed away. Without those items, it doesn’t last.” That at least was the truth. She prayed it would not satisfy him. The only way he would believe her was if he had to force her to tell him. Her only worry was that he would use his powers to make her tell him the truth. It would be all over then, he might even use that agony again. She would have to be careful.

“But... this is silver,” he exclaimed, wonder beginning to overtake displeasure. “Real silver!”

She tried to jerk it out of his hand, but he held tight. “It just feels like it. I’m sure alchemically it’s totally different.” Actually, she wasn’t sure of that herself. “It’s part of my...” she clamped her mouth shut.

“Part of your what?” he said, his voice going silky and dangerous. He pulled on

the lock, bringing her head closer to him. "Power? Was that what you were going to say? What does it do?"

"I can't... I won't give you that. Torture me if you like. I won't give you that."

"Oh, I don't need 'Agonare'," he chuckled. He waved his hand as he had before, "*Obtempero*. Now tell me what you were going to say."

She hid her smile. He'd resorted to the spell faster than she'd expected, a sure sign of weakness. And her expression of horror when he had spoken the word had been real, dreading what he would ask. It was perfect. She inwardly thanked the spirits for the gift, however they'd managed it. "I was going to say that when exposed to moonlight, it strengthens my powers, enhances my gift."

"It does, does it?" he mused with a grin, stroking the lock fondly. He would attempt to keep this information to himself. It would not do for the Master to know. He would find out soon enough if the strands could be cut, and if cut would they grow again. "Fascinating. This I shall put to the test. Could be most useful." He let her go, walked back to the table and picked up the tray. "You will want to remove those tangles, however. Most unbecoming." Though he had noticed that the silver strands lay straight and smooth. *Oh, yes*, he thought. *I will be putting this to the test.*

When he left the room and sealed the door, he saw the Master leaning over the font. He scowled. He'd heard every word. To Jonah's surprise, he did not look up, merely frowned. "Wasted effort," he said.

"What?" Jonah replied, trying not to snap. He set the tray on a nearby work table. "What was a waste?"

He gestured to the supplies Jonah had left out. "Fortifying her room."

Jonah crossed to the font, noticed with a surge of relief that what was reflected was not the room behind him, but the night sky. "I thought I explained. Some spirit managed to slip in, or... if she is telling the truth, was created by the work we do. It tried to strangle her and we need her alive. It will kill her if left unchecked."

The Master shrugged. "So, she does not sleep."

Jonah raised a brow. "I would prefer her coherent. She can only go so long without sleep."

The Master gave an exasperated sigh, "That is not what I meant, *Raduka*. It was a wasted effort because the time is right for the Crucible."

"What? The moon is not right!" Jonah exclaimed. He stormed over to the shelf, pulled down the book and began searching through it. "We cannot do it for another few weeks."

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“There is much you do not yet know, *Raduka*,” the Master chuckled. “Much. See here,” he pointed into the water, “the ascension of Mars and Saturn, a minor conjunction, but very advantageous to our purposes. It supersedes the need for a new moon. With it, the full will be far more a burgeoning font than the dark. The conjunction will be at its peak tonight at about... 10:00, just before. We must begin by 9. The circle is complete?”

Jonah was furious. On the one hand, it meant everything would soon be his, on the other, he was not certain he was quite ready. He had hoped to have at least a few more weeks. “It was,” he growled. “I have to make alterations now, to accommodate the moon. Nothing that requires specific moons to complete,” he added as the Master frowned. “Insert the planets in their place to draw upon them, reversing the moon and its position, etc. It will take less than an hour.”

The Master nodded, broke the surface of the font to break the spell. “Good,” he said, moving towards the stairs. “Make it so. Spend your last hours with her while you can. I do not know how much of your toy will be left when we are done.”

Jonah watched him go. He seemed to glide up the stair rather than walk, his tread quiet in the soft Russian boots. Jonah restrained the urge to throw something, to break things in his rage. Instead, he dropped the book on the nearest table and strode back into the bedroom, ripping his shirt off as he went.

Nea looked up from braiding her hair, startled by his explosion into the room. Before she could move, he shouted *agonare* and she found herself in the throes of torture. It was not a slow, subtle rising of heat this time. It was an instantaneous wracking of fire and electricity coursing through her, all her muscles contracting at once. Jonah was on the floor beside her, pressing hungry kisses to her writhing body as if intent on devouring her.



Thomas's first sensation was the smell of bacon. It was wafting in and out. The sound of something hissing in a frying pan began to fade in. He smelled coffee too. He groaned, struggled to open his eyes. Something black and white was swaying in front of him, slowly coming into focus. He wiped the sleep from his eyes, which helped to clear things a bit. Gaganan was swaying like a snake charmer, waving a piece of bacon under his nose. When Thomas opened his eyes and moved, he took his paws off the edge of the couch and sat down.

“That for me?” Thomas moaned, pointing to the bacon. In answer, Gaganan

turned and walked back into the kitchen with it, flicking his tail. “Guess not.” He sat up, quashed a wave of dizziness which subsided quickly. The kitchen came into focus, Anang’s back as she stood at the stove tipping another flapjack onto a mountain of them and turning back to tend her bacon, poured yet another portion of batter into the skillet. In the background he could hear the shower running.

Anang heard him moving in the living room. She saw Gaganan out of the corner of her eye as he headed to the protected corner under a narrow buffet table where she’d placed a cut up fried egg, and a couple pieces of bacon on a plate and a small bowl of milk. She flipped the flapjack in the skillet, gave the bacon a last push, then poured a cup of coffee and set it on the table next to the cream and sugar. She looked Thomas in the eye and pointed to the mug. He nodded silently and tried to sort his head out enough to cross to it. Anang went back to cooking.

He had finally made it to the table when Henry walked in the front door with both girls. Julia was ranting and raving about ageist rules and car rental places. Thomas looked over his shoulder, stirring his coffee, confused.

Henry clapped him on the back when he saw him. “Welcome to the world of the living!” he crowed.

Thomas grunted, sipped at his coffee. The smell of breakfast had him ravenous. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d taken more than a couple bites of food. To his relief, Anang had Julia delivering plates to the table, piled high with all sorts of Anang goodness. Joseph, fresh from the shower, joined them.

Once he had some coffee in him, Thomas felt a little clearer. “So once you guys got me out of the way, what plans did you make?” he asked amiably as he reached for some eggs and bacon.

They stared for a second. Then Henry laughed. “Got you out of the way, huh? That why you think we did it?”

“No,” said Thomas, frowning. “I *know* why you did it. Thank you, by the way, Anang. I do feel better. And I’m sorry I... acted out,” he stumbled.

“That what they’re calling it these days?” Hecuba mumbled.

Before anyone’s noses could get bent out of shape Joseph explained their intentions for the day. Since he was awake Thomas would take Julia for a drive with the rented car. She had insisted on going because of all the trouble she had to go through to get it, though Henry pointed out that technically he was the one who ‘got it’, even if she had paid for it. Henry and Joseph would go to Henry’s photo site and watch for them with binoculars and let them know when they could see them via the two way radios Joseph had manage to borrow. Once they knew where

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they were, they could coordinate from there. Hecuba and Anang were to remain in town and make mystical arrangements as necessary. They would meet back at the house for an early supper to ‘plan the assault’ as Henry put it.

Breakfast was enjoyed but hurried, then Anang sent them off with packed lunches for each car. “Do not take too many chances,” she warned Thomas. “If you see his car, do not try anything foolish.”

He sighed. “I’ll try not to try,” he groaned, throwing on his shoes. He looked down at Gaganan. “You coming or staying?”

The cat just cocked an eye, and flicked an ear, finally shook his head, patting the floor with a paw.

Anang pressed his lunch at him, shooing him out the door. “He’s going to wait here for word back from Eagle. Go on, you’re burning daylight.”

He had to stop himself from asking how she’d understand the message before he remembered the scrabble pieces. He met the others outside and Julia handed him the keys.



After they left, Anang handed Hecuba a set of keys. “Provided you can drive a stick?” she asked.

Hecuba nodded. “Learned on one.”

“Good, we take Joe’s pick-up. I don’t drive.”

They climbed into the ancient red truck. It was practically an antique, but was well kept. Anang gave her directions to a little shop near the town square where a pair of Haida women sat behind the counter working on various jewelry projects. One of them was helping a tourist pick out a pair of moccasins.

Both of them lit up when they saw Anang, began chattering a gay hello in a pidgin blend of Ojibwe and Haida with a smattering of Lakota. Hecuba waiting quietly in the back, watched as the younger tended to the tourist and the expression of the older suddenly went grave. She said something to her daughter, then led Anang into the back, gesturing for Hecuba to join them.

The back room was cozy, full of stock, beads, findings, and scraps of leather and feathers. There was also a kitchenette with a small tea table comfortable for two, but squeezable for three. Anang introduced Hecuba to Mary Bluehill, mentioning that her daughter’s name was Anne, and explained to Mary what had happened and what they needed. Hecuba listened intently, not having known that

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Anang was looking for a third wonder worker to help. She had thought they were merely looking for supplies.

Mary nodded. "I will speak to my father. He is your best choice, though he is a little... out there," she chuckled. "The spirits make off with his mind frequently."

Hecuba was worried. "Your father is the wonder worker?"

Mary gave a look of feigned shock, though her smile did not stray far from her face. "What, you thought they were only women? There may not be many men in your practice, my dear, but I assure you, the spirits do not discriminate."

Hecuba shook her head. "No, I am sorry. It is not what I meant. If his mind wanders... if he's getting... senile? What we are going to do could be very dangerous. I would not ask you to put that risk to him..."

She dismissed Hecuba's fears, began to bustle about making tea. "Oh, the spirits will keep his mind where they need it to be, you rest assured. The old goat can focus when he wants to. Being part of the rescue of the Speaker will be worth bags of tobacco at the drum circle, and at least a lamb at the potlatch," she chuckled. "Besides, he's a seer and a channel. You'll need him from what Anang tells me." She took the whistling kettle off the tiny stove and poured it into her pot, added the tea and herbs by pinch and measure from the canisters lined up on the counter. "Hmmm, almost out of hibiscus, Anang. You'll have to top me off later."

Anang nodded.

By the time Mary was setting the tea on the table, Anne had come into the back and joined them, hopping up onto the counter to conserve space. Mary quickly explained. Over tea, they made a list of what they would need.



The four of them met up at an overlook halfway back to Clarkstown. There, they marked both maps with the information from the GPS with their discoveries. They had narrowed things down to a single side road which was the only way, apparently, to reach the spire that Henry and Joseph had managed to relocate with the binoculars. If the maps were correct, there was no other road there. Joseph pointed out a second road that ran a thousand yards below the house, but did not connect at all. "If we drop you off here," he said, "you might be able to slip through the woods up to the back of the house. I hope you remember your lessons from the break about treading quietly in the forest."

"I do. I need more practice," he admitted, "but I'm better than your average

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city boy. You'd hear me, but I doubt Jonah will."

Joseph nodded, and began folding up the maps.

Thomas turned to Henry. "Did we move out of the dorm?" he asked sheepishly, remembering what they had been doing when he was drugged.

"Yeah, we did," Henry grinned, enjoying Thomas's discomfort at the fact. "I got help. Why?"

"So everything's at the apartment?"

"Again, yes, and why?" Henry insisted.

"I need to get something. Joseph, you take Julia back into town, pick up anything else we're going to need for tonight. I'll have Henry run me by the apartment on the way."

"You are, are you?" Henry said flatly, cocking an eyebrow.

"Come on, Henry," Thomas coaxed. "You have the apartment keys."

"True enough," he sighed, opening the van door. "Get in."



Henry let Thomas into the apartment. Thomas had not actually been there yet. It was a bit of a shock at first. It was definitely a bachelor pad. There was not much in the way of furniture, and what was there was mismatched at best and chosen for cost and comfort. The sofa looked as if it had been left at a curb, and Henry's friends had stapled a striped sheet to it to cover it up. All the extra money had apparently gone into the 'important' things: Electronics. Thomas only gave the large screen TV and the metre tall surround sound speaker system a glance and headed for the stack of boxes by the kitchen. He began searching through the few with his name on them.

Henry took a second glance around while he waited. He had begun to notice some minor changes had taken place since the night before, stuff he hadn't noticed in their rush to leave that morning. The girls had tidied up, attempted to take the edge off things.

Thomas finally found what he wanted. He sat down on the couch and set a wooden box on the coffee table. It was one of those hand-crafted jobs with attention taken to details like the scrolled lock and well oiled hinges. Henry wandered over to look. The inside of the case was velveteed and had indentations for the objects within, the sight of which made Henry gasp.

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Thomas lifted the revolver out of its place with great care, flipping open the chamber and making sure it was clean.

“That’s... that’s a...” Henry stammered, staring as Thomas opened a second tool kit and began to clean the weapon with almost expert efficiency.

“It was my dad’s.”

“I was going to say gun,” Henry growled. He watched the cleaning and reassembly process, his thoughts coming slowly. He had not known that Thomas had kept a gun in the dorm. “You got a registry certificate for that thing?”

“Yes, I do,” he said with a click as he snapped the chamber closed. He held it up, examining it carefully, took aim at the TV screen and test fired it. It cocked smoothly, almost silently, and the hammer clicked obediently against the empty chamber. “WWII standard officer issue M1911A1 pistol,” Thomas stated. He flipped the chamber open again, began to load it with the bullets in the case.

Henry gaped. He knew that Thomas had all his dad’s old stuff, even his RCAF things. He had even known about the gun. He just couldn’t believe Thomas had brought it to school with him. “Why... why didn’t you leave that at home? When did you bring it?”

Thomas sighed, closed the cylinder and spun it. “Year before last. Because over that summer my mother found the case and began trying to open it. She asked me if I had the key. I decided I couldn’t risk her getting into it.”

“She’s not a child, Thomas.”

“Sometimes she’s worse,” he sighed. “Sometimes she gets angry at the nurse or doesn’t remember her and wants her out of the house. Sometimes she thinks people are trying to break in, people like the postman or neighbours coming to visit, workmen. I don’t want her getting hurt or hurting someone just because she’s not...” He didn’t finish the thought, began putting extra bullets into his pocket.

“Hopefully you don’t plan on using that,” Henry began. He didn’t like guns.

“Hopefully I won’t have to. But I will if he gives me a reason.”

The flat, determined tone in Thomas’s voice made Henry back off, praying it wouldn’t come to bullets, for his sake. “Just...just tell me the ammo is a bit younger than the weapon...” he asked, relenting.

Thomas slid the gun into the pocket of his light jacket and did not answer.



When Henry and Thomas finally walked into the house, Joseph and Julia were

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gathered around the kitchen table sorting through a variety of eclectic objects. Hecuba and Anang were no where in sight, and the ferret's cage stood empty by the door. There were, however, some very odd noises coming from the bathroom.

Thomas stopped, listening. "What... What is that?"

"Lulabelle's been cooped up fer too long," Julia sighed. "We put her in the bathtub with a ball. Even Gaganan didn't want to deal with her."

"Oh." He crossed into the kitchen. "And what is all this?" he asked, still confused as he picked up a pack of jerky. "Camping gear?"

Julia grinned. "Yor house-breakin' kit!"

"Jerky? What, it's going to take me all day?"

"Duh, they're fer the guard dog," she retorted.

"Um... Jonah's not a dog person," Henry commented. "It's not likely he's going to have a guard dog."

Joseph shrugged. "His teacher might be. Remember this is not his house. Better to be prepared."

"I got jerky cause I figgered what you didn't use we could eat. Why waste it, ya' know?"

Thomas began to look through the items. "Pepper?"

"In case he uses dogs to folla you," Julia offered. "...Or they don't go for the treats."

"Ok, the treats and the pepper I get, but tennis balls? What am I going to do, play fetch?"

"You never know," she snapped, snatching the ball out of his hand and putting it into the large hip pack she had in front of her.

He looked over the rest of the stuff. There were all kinds of weird things: fishing wire, a blank credit card from one of those 'your name here' offers, duct tape, jacks, fishing line, hair spray, a lighter.

"Let me guess," said Henry, hefting the bag of jacks. "Caltrops?"

Julia grinned, nodding, pointed to the hairspray and lighter. "Flame-thrower, trip wire/garrote," she added nudging the fishing wire, "which can also be used to lift things too far below you in a pinch."

"You've been watching too many spy movies," said Hecuba entering the kitchen door, pausing to hold it open for Anang.

Henry looked her over. She had changed clothes. She was wearing sapphire blue from head to toe, even her boots were blue. The blouse was sheer and he could see a white tank top beneath it, and the lacy edge of a white petticoat peeked

deliberately out from under her skirt. Her arms and hands, usually laden with silver jewelry, were oddly barren. The most interesting thing, was the marks she had placed on her brow with what he hoped had only been a blue eyebrow pencil. In the centre of her forehead was a star sapphire.

Hecuba caught him looking, pressed the jewel at her 'third eye' chakra point to make sure it was secure. "For clarity," she said.

Anang entered carrying a box that rattled like milk bottles when she walked. She set it onto the counter and joined the others at the table, examined its contents. Anang nodded, "Duct tape. Good for everything," she said. "White man's best invention. Well... most useful."

"I figured if you had to break the window to get in, you could put it on the pane before you break the glass," Joseph said. "Then just peel the tape off with the glass. Less risk of noise and getting cut. You are going to need to be quiet. You did bring your moccasins, didn't you?"

Thomas jerked his thumb towards the front yard. "Still in my trunk with my suitcase. I noticed someone brought my car over. Thanks."

Joseph nodded. "Didn't want to leave it in the pit when there were no other cars. Not safe. You might want to dig out that black turtleneck of yours too," he suggested. "You'll blend in better."

Thomas nodded, watching the 'house-breaking kit' disappearing piece by piece in to the hip pack.

Hecuba picked up the credit card. "What's he going to do with this?" she asked. "Charge him?" she smirked.

Julia snatched it away, feeling a little miffed at the criticisms. "Fer openin' locked doors."

Hecuba gave a sigh of the long suffering, grabbed Thomas's wrist and pulled him down the hall to the bathroom door. The others half followed. "Ok," she began. "If the front door is locked, its likely to be a dead bolt. Card's not going to work."

"Inside..." Julia protested.

Hecuba shook her head. "That only works on hotels and dorm rooms. Inside you most likely are only going to have one kind of locking knob. This kind," she pointed to the bathroom knob. She opened it and reached around locking it, closed it again before the ferret in the tub could react. She pulled a bobby pin from her hair, the tress it was holding up falling directly in her face. She pushed it impatiently behind her ear. "See this hole?" she pointed. Thomas nodded. She stuck the bobby

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pin in. "Insert, feel around a sec, push then turn," she instructed, demonstrating. The lock popped. She swung the door open proudly, to find the ferret sitting up on her hind legs just on the other side, investigating curiously. Hecuba shrieked, slamming the door closed. She shuddered.

"You knew she was in thar," Julie said quietly.

Hecuba caught her breath. "I... just wasn't expecting her... right there.... Just... Just get out of my way." She pushed her way past them into the living room, hitting Henry on the arm as she went. "That's enough out of you, fuzzy," she snapped.

He stopped chuckling when Julia mouthed 'phobic' to him.

Anang took over, pulled the bobby pin from the door and pressed it into Thomas's hand. "Keep that handy." She moved everybody to the living room. "All right. Joseph is taking me and Hecuba to Crazy Smoke's. We've got the old shaman to help, and they've generously offered their small ranch for the ritual. It's nice and isolated. Joseph, get that blanket from the top of the closet, the gift blanket. We're going to need to give him something." Joseph disappeared obediently. "Henry, you are to take the rented car and drive Thomas out towards the house. You and Joseph have already discussed the wheres and whyfores, so I'm not going into that. You know what to do. Julia, you have the option, go with them and sit with Henry in the car waiting for Thomas to come back with Nea, or come with us. I'm sure Anne can find something to keep you busy."

Julia did not relish the thought of sitting in a dark car on the side of the road worrying all night. "No offence, Henry, but I'll go with Anang," she said.

He shrugged, gave a grin. "Hey, I'm sure watching the witches do that witchy thing they do is far more interesting than driving the get away car."

Joseph returned with the blanket over his arm. "This the one you wanted, Star?"

She glanced back at him. "Yes. Oh, give them the ear things for the radios before we leave. Thomas at the very least will need one," she said, returning to the kitchen for her box.

Hecuba took the blanket from him so he could get the ear-mics. He handed one to Thomas and one to Henry, made sure both of them had a radio. He also handed Henry a cell-phone.

"I thought we couldn't afford these," Henry piped up.

"I can," Julia said, fist on her hip. "I figgered I couldn't help any other way.... Besides, they were buy one get one on the phones and we kin always use them. They got that touch-to-talk feature, so we can remain connected with you without

hangin' up."

"But the radios...." Thomas began.

"Wouldn't reach from Crazy Smoke's ranch to where you're going to be. They only have a three kilometre range," Joseph answered. "We thought about giving you the phone and the two of us being directly connected, but then we'd need a way to alert Henry, should he need to prepare to drive off. It's going to be hard enough on him sitting there without being aware of what's going on."

"We thought about that when Anang told us they were going t' the ranch," Julia said. "Mr. Redbird said the radios wouldn't reach so... I decided I wanted a cell phone. Sometimes they're cheaper than a land line anyway. I got a good deal so don't sweat it. You'll have to play relay," she told Henry, shrugging. "But there it is."

"Well what about these?" he asked, holding up the ear-mics.

Anang answered from the front door. "Phillip brought them by earlier. Said he forgot to give them to Joseph when he borrowed the radios. Lucky us he's a major technophile. Now are you three coming?" she snapped. "It'll be dark soon."

Joseph headed after his wife, paused at the door. "Wait until about 9:30, 10 o'clock before you head out. You'll want some darkness, what little you're going to get tonight with a full moon. I think they're going to try and conjure you some cloud cover, but don't count on it. The spirits may not be willing." He paused to listen to something Anang told him from the truck, relayed it. "She said she's left some supper in the fridge. Make sure you eat it or she'll be mighty cross."

Julia turned from putting Lulabelle back into to her cage, handed Thomas the hip pack. "Oh, yore kit. Be careful," she said, unshed tears in her eyes. "You bring her back, you hear?"

"I will."

"You know....," she said, looking up at him. "He may not be able to stop you with his magic but... what if he resorts to mundane means?"

He patted his jacket pocket. "I've taken out a little insurance."

Before she could ask, Henry took her gently by the arm and began to guide her towards the door. "You do not want to know, so don't ask."

Joseph caught Thomas's eye at that, gave a sigh and a nod, understanding. "Be careful," he said, and followed Julia to the truck.

Thomas sat down on the couch, fingering the lumpy packet in his hands. Gaganan crawled out from the sofa as soon as Henry closed the door, shook himself and hopped up next to Thomas.

Henry, who had been about to sit there, sighed and found another perch.

The Speaker

Thomas put his arm around the cat. "Ask them to give me the strength to do this, huh, kiddo?" he said.

Gaganan cocked his head, giving him a 'you know better' look, then just butted his head against him, comforting and seeking comfort at the same time.

"How come he didn't go with them?" Henry asked. Thomas had finally explained about the connection between the cat and Nea, about his magical purpose. "Wouldn't the familiar be an excellent focus?"

Thomas looked down at the cat. "Yeah," he said. "How come?" he asked him.

Gaganan touched his paw first to his own chest, then to his.

"You're coming with me?" he asked. Gaganan nodded. "It might be too dangerous." The cat chattered at him. "I know you can get into places I can't," he said, only guessing at what the cat might suggest. "I know you might be of some use, can sniff her out, but... it's too great a risk." The cat became more animated and insistent. Thomas put his hands on his shoulders as he would have to a human friend, held him still. "Listen. Jonah is Western magic. And, while he cannot affect you with it while you are near me...he knows what a familiar is. He sees you and you will be his first target. Nea would never forgive me."

The cat jumped off him and ran to the low shelf where the scrabble pieces had been placed in a baggie. He tore through the plastic, began sorting the pieces, flipping them and pushing them into place. "She s mine Take me or I will go alone."

"And how will you find her now, by yourself, when you couldn't before?" Henry asked, feeling very silly talking to the cat. But then, it was talking back with letters, so it was a little lower on the weirdness metre.

"I read the map"

"It's a long run, Gaganan," Thomas said. "But you understand why I'm worried. Your getting hurt would kill her."

"I will sense the snake before you and cant hit what cant see." He had to rearranged the words a bit, dropping out some when he realized he would not have enough of the right letters. He was more concerned with sense than grammar. "Use outweigh risk," he added, pulling out the letters from the previous sentence.

"Cat's got you, Thom."

Thomas glared at Henry. "Who's side are you on?"

"The one that makes sense apparently. Face it, you need his nose." Henry leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. "Listen. Hecuba's already told me they aren't going to be able to guide you through the house. If they're even able to 'lock on' Nea at all, the best she can give you is left, right, up or down. They may

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not even be able to find her. Just Jack-ass-obi. That being the case his nose is your best weapon. Besides, if he's as handy with those paws as he seems to be he might be able to get in and open a door for you." He looked to the cat, shaking his head at himself as he asked, "I am right in assuming you understand every word I'm saying?"

The cat nodded sagely.

"See?" he said triumphantly. "No communication gap. The perfect cat burglar."

Thomas groaned at the pun. Even Gaganan placed a paw over his face, wincing.

"Now, shall we see what Mrs. Redbird left us for dinner?" Henry finished, getting up and headed for the fridge.

Thomas sighed. "Always thinking with your stomach."

Gaganan paused long enough to spell out one more sentence before bounding into the kitchen himself. "Im with fuzy on this one."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR:

Rituals

Nea barely stirred on the bed when Jonah walked in the door. He threw something across her legs. “Are you going to resist me?” he asked, his voice cold.

‘What do you think?’ she thought. But did not have much left to physically say it. She merely turned her face away from him.

“I warned you this would happen. Now it is time. Put that dress on. Brush your hair, hide that streak if you can.” Still she did not move. “You have five minutes,” he snapped. “When I come back I will take you out there as you are, dressed or not, your choice.”

She heard the faint pop of his bones as he turned violently and stormed from the room. Only then did she even attempt to move. Every muscle screamed in protest. It was as if the fire he had ignited in her body had not died as she had hoped, but merely banked itself, and every movement stirred the coals back to life. She managed to sit up, saw the white material laying across her bare legs.

She held it up. It was barely more than two strips of cloth seamed down the side and at the top corners: a Roman shift. The material was fine linen, suggesting a previous life as a sheet, though she found nothing to confirm this. Well, if he thought she was going any where near that other man in just this, he had another thing coming. She forced herself to move, to get off the bed. She bent to collect her underwear, fell to her knees and stayed there for a moment. She did not have long. She steeled herself against the pain, tried to work up enough adrenalin that it wouldn't matter. She slipped the undergarment over her hips. Attempting to fasten

it, she noticed Jonah had broken one of the hasps. It was still useable, barely. The bone 's'-hook would simply slip into both sides at once with the half remaining. The sharp edge bit into her hip, but she could live with it.

She turned to the wardrobe, pulling out the lingerie drawer, dug around until she found her bra, the one Hecuba and Julia had made for her, and apparently the only one in there. She hastily put it on, glad of its small comfort before she threw the 'dress' over her head. She did not have time to get to her hair. The hem of the dress was just settling around her ankles when Jonah entered. His appearance was something of a shock. He was wearing black from head to toe: a long robe with full sleeves and a pointed hood which at the moment lay at his back.

He frowned. "Slow aren't we," he commented dryly.

"We are in pain," she snarled.

"Ahh," he breathed, smiling faintly as if remembering the cause with pleasure. He crossed behind her, took the brush from the dressing table and ran it roughly through her hair. He gathered it together at the nape of her neck, taking care to twist the silver strand under then tied it with an elastic. He threw the brush at the table, turned her to inspect his work. "It will have to do," he sighed. Then he noticed the bra strap, ran his finger under it. "Defying me still?" he smirked, letting it go with a snap, taking deep pleasure in the gasp of pain from her. "This last I will allow. But it *will* be the last," he said. "Let's go. The Master is waiting." With his silent command to the bands on her wrists, Nea had no choice but to turn and follow him out.



Crazy Smoke's ranch was a small spread two kilometres outside of Clarkstown. A large arching sign over the gate proudly announced "Smoking Crow Ranch". The drive was lined with pastures, one containing a few alpaca and the other sporting a high chicken wire fence corralling turkeys, pheasant and other birds, and more than one peacock. Julia took everything in, fascinated, pointing things out to each as they passed. Hecuba sat quiet, trying to focus herself to stay centred.

Julia suddenly nudged her as the house came into sight. "Say, how did you know how to open locks like that?"

Hecuba sighed, suppressed a grin. "My little brother used to lock himself in the bathroom with my diary. You can't kill them, if you can't get to them."

Julia settled back against the seat, trying to get comfortable in the crowded cab.

The Speaker

“Glad I never had one o’them.”

“You miss them when they’re gone, though.”

Julia looked at her, not entirely certain what she had meant by ‘when they’re gone’. She did not have time to ask.

Mary and Anne trotted out of the ancient looking wooden house to meet them. Gratefully, the two girls climbed out of the truck the instant it had stopped moving, before Joseph could cut the engine. They moved around, stretching out cramped limbs. They had been crammed together in a three man cab for fifteen minutes, an uncomfortable ride at best. Joseph had refused to allow them to ride in the bed, because they had to go over a few highways.

Mary and Anang hugged each other, Anne grabbed the box out of the back and called for Hecuba and Julia to follow her.

“Joseph, Maynard’s out back setting up, if you would?” Mary said. “I’m sure he’d love the help.”

Joseph nodded and headed around the house.

As they were led into it, Hecuba and Julia got a closer look at the old building. It was unpainted, the wood grey and worn, looked like it belonged in a ghost town rather than on an active, thriving ranch. Once they crossed the threshold, they were shocked to find the interior warm, well repaired and comfortable, if simple and native in style. A loom dominated a corner of the large front room, with a brightly patterned blanket or rug half finished on it.

They were led through this room and to the open kitchen beyond where a gnarled and bent old man was measuring a powdered substance into a tiny wooden bowl, humming a ragged tune to himself. He looked up when they entered, his wild, unbound grey hair put Hecuba in mind of an Indian Einstein. He cracked a broad grin, proudly displaying some missing teeth. “Heehee, twinkle twinkle, it’s our little Star. The spirit speaker’s here. And with a white raven, how nice. Come to help stir the pot? Bubble bubble and all that?”

Hecuba tried not to laugh, Julia giggled, but turned away.

The old man waved his hand at them. “Laugh girl, if you feel like it. It’s a gift. I’m not a clown, lucky you, but I like to hear the laughter of the young. Especially at my expense. Heheh,” he chuckled, tapping his wrinkled forehead with a gnarled finger. “I know it ain’t that long before they know what it feels like, heehee.” He put the powders away, began to sprinkle some dried petals into another little bowl. When he was done he dusted his hands. “That’s done, I think. Unless I am forgetting something, daughter?” he asked.

The Speaker

Mary looked the table over, nodded. "I'll get it. Anne, why don't you and... Julia, wasn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am," Julia nodded.

"Why don't you two start taking these out to your father. He'll tell you where they go."

As Julia moved forward to help the old man puckered up his face. "Don't I just look like one o' them dried apple faces?"

Julia burst out laughing. He looked 'just' like one of those dried apple carvings.

"Ok, ok, Mary Mary quite contrary," the old man giggled as his daughter shooed him into the living room. He took Anang and Hecuba with him.

He sat them down on the leather couch, perching himself in a rocker by the unlit fire. "All righty then, ducklings. We know what we're about, eh? Three's good, glad you agreed with the visions and came to me. I can see farther, deeper. Plus, better blending to the brew. Different magics and all. Now we gots your maiden, mother and codger" he cackled, pointing at Hecuba.

"It's supposed to be crone," Hecuba smiled. "But power is power." 'And you, old man,' she thought, 'you reek of it.'

"I reek of a few other things, too," he chuckled, laughed harder when Hecuba gasped. He suddenly grew serious. "You against breathin' things that'll open up that precious third eye o'yorn?" he asked, leaned forward in the chair, pointed to the sapphire at her brow.

She touched it self consciously. "If it will help us find Nea, no sir, I am not. If you told me I had to drink cyanide, I'd think twice, but I'd probably still do it," she sighed. "Jonah Jacobi is a very bad man. It's his sort which makes life more difficult for the rest of my kind."

"The rotten apple disease," he nodded, satisfied with her answer, went back to rocking. "Good. I won't be feeding you apple seeds, Mâkskâq, but what we do here could be equally dangerous."

"I'm sorry, mack's cake?" Hecuba asked.

Mary translated. "White Raven."

Hecuba blanched. "That's... what Tuwe called me. Well, not the White part but... Raven."

"Must be your name then," the old man chuckled. "Anyhoo. What we battle here is white man's magic. Our weapons are mostly native. You... you are our bullet proof war shirt, the arrowhead that will penetrate the white man's defences But we have to make them work together, and I know little about white man's magic

beyond broomsticks and cauldrons and bunny hats.”

When all of them looked expectantly at Hecuba, she had no idea what to say. “I... I don’t know much about his magic, or that of this teacher of his. I know he uses sympathetic stuff, based on what he did to Nea a few months ago. He’s a charmer, but I don’t think he uses talismans in his work.”

“Explain how *you* would do this thing,” Mary asked from the kitchen where she was listening.

“Well,” she began, thinking. “I would draw a circle, maybe a pentagram, but not necessarily. I would definitely use salt for protection. The last time I tried to scry him... I have this black mirror for that...” she fumbled, sighed, decided to explain by example. “Ok. Someone was leaving flowers for Nea. She was worried, I was worried... I did a ritual to find out who. I lit candles, surrounding myself with them, as fire is a protection and a focus. I called my corners, made a salt circle, again for protection. I wrote my question on a paper, rolled a petal of one of the flowers with it and burned it in a ‘sacred fire’. I took the ashes, mixed them on the mirror with a honey liqueur I have and swirled it, picking the ‘vision’ and answers to my questions from the patterns and images on the glass. When I tried to see the one sending her the roses, the candles went out and the salt turned to ash.”

“Hmmm,” the old man mused.

“Not too much different, father,” said Mary.

“Enough,” he mused. “There are differences enough. Explain your clothes,” he said suddenly.

Hecuba became self-conscious. “Well...white protects me, so I have it close to my skin to reflect ill intents away. The blue is for clarity.”

“And this,” he asked, pointing to his own forehead.

“It... it’s kind of an Eastern influence,” she blushed. “I have some friends from India, though they are not...wonder workers, as you call them. The sapphire is for vision and clarity, the star helps to focus the ‘third eye’, allowing me to see beyond... what is in front of me. The markings... well... I think the making of them helped more than the existence of them.”

He nodded, seemed to be lost in the smoke of his thoughts for a moment. “What we will do is not very different,” he began finally. “We will chant for focus, each in our own tongue and way. We will ‘call our corners’, seeking the blessings of the four winds.” Hecuba nodded. She had expected as much, after spending a week on the Mountain. “We will not, however, use outward gazing to view our target, but inward. You have something of his?”

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“Yes, sir,” she said. “It is with the things we brought.”

“Good. We will treat this as you did the petal and the question, but we will not pour this on a plate. What we will do is stronger, more reliable...and more dangerous.”



When Nea entered the room she would have fled if she had not been forced to follow. The chamber just beyond hers was huge, maybe six metres by nine. It was bare at its heart save for an enormous pentagram that glittered and loomed ominously on the floor, surrounded by candlesticks some as tall as a man. Just beyond that was a strange baptismal looking stone font, and along the barren stone walls were a few bookshelves overflowing with dusty old volumes, and a few work tables against the walls. There was only one other door she could see, but she doubted it led anywhere safe. That would be up the staircase on her right.

Jonah led her to the pentagram, pointed to a small circle inside one of the points. It glittered like powdered silver in the dim light. “Step there, carefully. Tread only on bare stone.”

Nea had no choice but to obey. She stepped stiffly over the intricate patterns into the eighteen inch circle, watched as he poured a bit of a homemade glue on the two inch wide incomplete edge of the circle and sprinkled more of the powdered silver onto it. Nea felt as if a cage door had suddenly closed on her. He was chanting under his breath, and she knew he would no longer need to concentrate on controlling her. She could move of her own will, but could not cross that glittering line. She was trapped here, subject to whatever ritual he had planned.

From across the room, at that other door, she felt the looming presence of impending doom. She whirled. The door opened and a man walked out. He was dressed as Jonah was, though his white hair was covered by the hood, casting his sharp, dangerous features deep in shadow. But she recognized him, none-the-less. It was the man who had driven her back to the wall in the other room, the one she had been loathe to be touched by. His presence preceded him across the floor, made her shiver. She crouched in her tiny circle, her dress pooling around her. She did not notice that even her skirts would not cross the line of silver.

The man glowered at her. “She is not placed right. She should be in the centre,” he said flatly. “Where all sacrifices belong,” he sneered, his eyes locked with hers, saying the last for her benefit alone.

The Speaker

Jonah sighed, waiting at one of the other points with glue and a different powdered substance. “No, Master. Had we one more or one less, it would be so. With four, the victim would have to be on a point. So with two, for balance.” He pointed out the gleaming lines that vee’d out from Nea’s point. “That draws the power from her to us.”

Nea’s attention turned to Jonah. “What? Draws power? You’re going to use me for a battery?” she spat.

Suddenly she was on her feet and face to face with the Master. She could smell his fetid breath and a host of other stinks masked by heavy incense. “No, little mouse,” he purred. “Did he not tell you? We are taking *your* power.” He laughed as she shuddered, her eyes wide, leaning back against the unseen barrier as if it were a glass wall. He walked away, skirting the pentagram. “You forgot the circle, *Raduka*,” he sneered.

Jonah resisted the urge to growl and snap, kept his voice properly respectful. “I didn’t have time, Master. I could only do that once the base was done and only on a new moon. It was designed to be circled and sealed just before the ritual began. Besides, a circle is to keep things in, and we aren’t summoning anything.”

“If you did it now?” he asked, fixing Jonah with his penetrating stare.

“We would not like the effects. Besides, I haven’t enough silver left to do a full moon circle.”

The Master sighed. “Very well,” he said and lifted his robes delicately and stepped into his point. His eyes remained locked on Nea’s, like a snake paralysing a bird, while Jonah sealed the circle around his feet.

In another minute, Jonah was within his own circle at the next point and closed in and the whole pentagram began to pulse and glow. The two of them began to chant. The overhead lights went out, the candles burst to life, casting an eerie, flickering glow from their varying heights. Nea fought the urge to weep, to scream. Instead, she began to pray.



It was past twilight when Hecuba and Anang were taken outside. The backyard was lit by four fires at the cardinal points, each in their own carefully laid pit and tended by a man. Each man held something different in his hand. One had a red-skinned drum, another a black rattle, a third a yellow whistle, and the fourth man, a thin sheet of white metal that Hecuba knew from theatre experience would make

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the sound of thunder. Joseph perched on an upturned log near the centre of the yard. Julia and Anne stood on the porch, each holding a large jug. In the centre, Hecuba could see that three concentric circles had been dug and that the bowls the old man had been preparing were now in the middle of them around a small fire-pit waiting to be lit.

As they stepped out of the door, Julia handed Hecuba her jug. Anne gave hers to Anang, which sloshed slightly, but did not spill. Looking inside, Hecuba noticed hers was full of salt. The old man led the way to the circles, walked across the plank that bridged them to the centre, picked a spot and stood there, waiting for the ladies. Anang entered next, stepping to his right, leaving room for Hecuba. Once they were across, Anne took away the plank, made sure the three inch deep trenches had not been overly disturbed.

Once everything was ready, the old man held up his arms to the sky. The musicians took that for a cue and began playing a haunting melody, the drum slow and pacing as the old man began to chant. Hecuba realized what he was doing the moment he turned to face the first of the four main fires. He was calling the winds, 'the corners' as it was called in her practice. She noticed, just before he turned from each of the bonfires, that they flickered in his direction for a brief moment. When he had come full circle he crouched to the fire laid in the middle of them and blew through his cupped hands on it. Hecuba almost jumped as the fire burst to life unexpectedly. She watched him then take a bundle of white sage and light it, blew it out til it smoked, chanting all the while, and began to smudge the circle and its occupants.

Hecuba could feel the cleansing, felt somehow purer and more ready for what lay before her as the acrid bite of the smoke stung her nose. She closed her eyes, letting the incense and the music and the chanting flow through her and strengthen her. There was a sudden roar and a burst of heat behind and around her and she opened her eyes. The old man stood, feet carefully between the trenches, just unbending with a lighted twig in hand. The outer circle was now on fire. The old man returned the twig to the inner fire and stepped close to it, turning to stand with his back to it.

Now the music changed its tone, becoming more fluid with touches of the thunder sheet. Anang began to call the corners, following similar patterns but with different words. The bonfires sizzled in response, though they did not bend to her. When she was done, she stepped one foot carefully between the inner and middle circles and poured the water from her jug into the middle trench.

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Hecuba felt the surge of power like a cool wave pass over her. As Anang turned her back to the inner fire, she realized that it was her turn. Again the music changed, becoming more reedy, more haunting, the drum more ponderous and Hecuba realized she was representing the element of Earth. She began to call the corners in her own way, grateful for the fires which unerringly marked the cardinals for her. She noticed, out of the corner of her eye, as she looked heaven-ward, that each of the fires flickered for a second a deeper yellow before she turned to the next. When she was finished, she stepped to the last trench and began to line its base with the salt in her jug. The circle was wide enough to allow her to walk around the others without knocking them into the small fire. When she was done, she set down her jug as Anang had done and joined them with their backs to the fire, mindful of her skirts.

She felt both Anang and the old man reaching for her hands, accepted them as he began chanting and raised their arms slowly skyward. Anang, too, began to chant a prayer in her own tongue, and so Hecuba felt a similar need, and called upon the universal forces for clarity and vision and the tools with which to help her friend home safely.

Suddenly the music stopped, and their hands let go and she heard them turning. She turned, sat with them as the old man rubbed his hands together and said, "Now to business."

She had noticed before that the fire was laid in a narrow ring. Crazy Smokes now took up a tall clay cup and began to add a pinch of this and a pinch of that to it, passed it to Anang who poured in the last of her water into it. She passed it to Hecuba, gesturing to the salt jug. Hecuba took the cup and looked in the jug, praying there was enough salt left. There were a few grains. She threw these in, passed the cup back to the old man. He took it, twisting it into the soft earth beside him so it would not fall over easily. He had set a mortar bowl in front of him. "The letter," he said, holding out his hand.

Hecuba looked around, saw it beside her, neatly rolled and tied with four colours of string: red, black, yellow and white. She handed it to him. He presented it to the four corners, chanting softly all the while and touched it to the fire. Once it was lit he held it up letting it burn a bit before turning the fire side down and setting it in the mortar. He let it burn to ash. Once it was out, he applied the pestle adding a pinch of a few herbs from the bowls around him, grinding them all to a fine powder which he poured into the clay cup. Hecuba winced. They were going to have to drink that. She tried not to think about it, turned the words upon that paper

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over in her mind instead, focusing on the monster who had written them: ‘Take me to thy breast and consume me upon that altar of your body. Destroy all weakness and make me anew, make me a god among men.’ ‘I’ll make you a god among ants,’ she thought. ‘Only you would equate sex to...’ The thought came to a screeching halt. She banished what had been about to follow it from her mind, fervently praying he had not been practising Tantric magic with Nea.

She heard the deep, hollow pop of a familiar bottle being uncorked, looked up to see Crazy Smokes pouring a measure of her honeyed liqueur into the cup, stirring it. *At least it will be sweet*, she thought. She noticed the musicians were playing again, something subtle. The old man held the cup to the sky, chanting over it, then set it in the centre of the fire ring. He took a small, blackened chip from one of the bowls, set it in the fire, still chanting in a singsong voice. He handed the bowl to Anang who did the same, took up the chant in a different tongue. Hecuba had seen her like this, heard her like this enough these last few days to know these were prayers, most likely requests for the visions they would need. The bowl was passed to Hecuba.

She tried not to think what the chips were. Peyote maybe? They were hard yet rubbery, like old raisins left out too long, and about the size of a quarter. She dropped it into the fire, began to pray to the goddess and the universe for visions of the enemy, strength to penetrate his defences, and protection from his retaliation. The scent of the burning chips was more acrid than the sage and yet strangely sweet at the same time. They smoked and sizzled, and made her head swim. She closed her eyes and rocked in place, letting the drums and the fumes and the raw power beginning to pulse up from the ground around her guide her mind and her prayers.



Henry pulled the car into a secluded spot just off the road. He shut off the engine and the lights, leaned back in the seat to get comfortable. Thomas had said hardly anything the whole way out there, sitting with the cat curled up in his lap, his fingers buried in the thick fur. The purring was audible before. It became cavernously loud in the sudden silence. Perhaps they were comforting each other.

They had sat like this for barely five minutes when the cell phone’s ringing nearly scared them out of their skins. Henry picked it up, hit the talk button. “Go ahead,” he said, taking a deep breath in an attempt to get his heart rate down again.

Joseph’s voice filled the car. “They’ve begun. You boys in position yet?”

“We are and wait your signal,” Henry continued, glancing out the opposite

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window at the desolate strip of highway when a car drove past.

“Get him ready. I don’t know how long this will take.”

“Roger. Over and out,” he finished, setting the phone down and fishing for something in his pocket.

“The ear-sets are here,” Thomas said, pulling them out of the compartment between the seats, thinking that was what Henry was trying to get.

“No, not it,” he grunted, finally pulling it out. He settled back down and passed Thomas his Leatherman. “Here.”

“What? No,” Thomas protested, throwing up his hands, refusing. “I can’t... what if I get caught or lose it...”

“Then I get another one. You gave me this multitool for my birthday. Only fitting I use it to help you out. You may need it. You know how to use one of these?”

Thomas reluctantly accepted the narrow, sleek bar of metal. “Yes. My dad had something like it from his pilot days. I used to play with it. I left it at Mom’s though.”

Henry nodded, stared out the window as a second car passed.

Thomas looked this time. “You got everything you need in case someone stops to ‘help you?’”

“Yeah,” he answered blandly. “I’m waiting on a tow,” he said, fitting one of the earphones into his ear. “What channel? Nine?” he added, fiddling with the dial on the base unit.

“No,” Thomas sighed, accepting his friend’s choice of topic. “Joseph said that was what the rangers use. I think six is what he said. If we get into trouble, he said to switch to One and broadcast a general distress call. Apparently some of the local patrolmen keep their ears on that one in case some hiker gets lost or hurt or a truck driver hits a moose.”

Henry couldn’t help chuckling at that. “Never, *ever* blow your horn at a moose.”

“Cause all it means to the bull...” Thomas grinned.

“... is *charge!*” they cried together. It was a running joke on campus. Just about every semester, some freshman would make that mistake. For weeks afterwards, as they passed by, usually walking for a while if they were lucky to be able to walk at all, someone would imitate the sound of a car horn. When that happened, at least two others would suddenly raise their head, do moose imitations and bellow *charge!*

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They laughed. But the moment couldn't last. Soon they were sitting in silence again staring at the deepening night.

"You sure that witch of yours can pull this off?" Henry asked suddenly.

Thomas looked over at him, squinted to see his profile in the dark. He couldn't make out an expression, leaned his head back again, returned to studying the branches of a sycamore ahead of them off the shoulder. "One: she's not *my witch*. Two: she's not alone."

"Whatever. But can they do it?"

Thomas sighed. "I've seen a lot of strange things these last few months, Henry. I've seen a ferret grow to the size of a cat and back, actual levitation, an elk turn into a woman and then into an otter. ...I've watched Nea fly. I've held her as she shifted forms. I've seen a raven the size of an eight year old. I guess...yes, I believe they can do it if it can be done."

"So...you believe in magic?" His voice was quiet.

Thomas sighed. "Yes, Henry. I do. I've seen too much not to."



Hecuba felt strange. Never before had she completely given herself over to the magic, to the power she was sure was deep within her but of which she had never seen concrete evidence. Oh, she had scried before, but never like this. The music moved her, lifted her up physically...or was that metaphysically? It was all chemical, she supposed. It had to be. No spell or scry she had ever attempted had been like this. It was complete and consuming, real and present. She was flying. She could hear the beating of feathers against the air around her ears, throwing her into the night sky. Below her, she saw the farm fall away and the mountain rush up, swift and unerring. Now she circled, restless, searching, her prey somewhere unseen below her.



Nea felt like screaming, like battering herself against the barrier, clawing at the circle at her feet to break it. She felt the panic rising up within her like a bird trapped in a cage with a cat. But she did not give in. She was Mainganoden, Ojibwe. She was a proud race, she would meet her fate with grace and dignity. If opportunity came to fight she would exact a deep and heavy price for her life, but

she would not spend herself uselessly, or for their pleasure. If she thought screaming might distract them, disrupt the quiet chanting she would have, but they seemed oblivious to the world around them.

Having no other recourse, she prayed. Not being a Wonder Worker she could not hope to counter what they were attempting, and she knew the spirits could not reach her to help and the ones that could...would not help, only circle and wait to pick over the carcass of her soul. She could only hope that the great spirit had a better plan for her than this.

The circle at her feet flared suddenly. She looked down, watched the silvery shavings begin to glow like the bracelets did when she tried to change, watched the light rise up in a column around her, sealing her in a jar of light she could see as well as feel. The symbols on the floor lit up in a cascade, and the lines of the pentagram ran bright, racing like a river of light until they met themselves and the whole began to pulse and hum. Jonah's eyes were closed, his arms thrown up, ecstasy on his face as he chanted louder and louder. The Master on the other hand, faltered.

He looked around him as the lines that made his point began to pulse, seemed to flow away from him. The brightness on the one side raced towards the girl and *around her!* On the other, they crossed in front of Jonah, bounced from point to point until they returned to the boy, slowing and ending at his tip. The circle around him began to brighten and ebb with each pulse, while he himself felt weaker, his power draining away. He stared, dumbfounded at the symbols on the floor, trying to find the error, what had gone wrong. Everything looked right for a second, then seemed to change as he stared, to rearrange itself. Without the book he could not completely decipher what had been done, but he recognized some of the symbols at his own feet and knew they should have been surrounding the victim instead. Staring, he realized that the circle at the girl's feet was not silver but platinum, sealing her off from the whole proceeding. The boy had no intentions of taking her power. Passion had spoiled everything.

He desperately attempted a counter-chant, tried to use his magic to put a stop to this, but the power became a vapour no sooner the words left his mouth, was sucked into the lines at his feet and fed directly to Jonah.

Nea watched the other man. It began to dawn on her what was happening just as it was dawning on him. She read it easily in his face. Rage and panic passed over him, were vented on the invisible walls around him. Nea felt no pity. This was the fate he had intended for her. Prayers were answered. She watched the pale blue

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vapour leave his mouth, drawn from his fingers as he attempted to work his wonders from within, but it was too late. The power was sucked away from him before it could help him. She followed the magic on its path, around her, in front of her, skipping her entirely and feeding into Jonah. She supposed, if things had gone the way the man had intended, those lines would be racing from her own point towards the two of them.

She could not relax, even realizing that she was protected, locked outside of this horror. This would only mean that Jonah would emerge from this stronger, harder to escape. Maybe he would be disoriented for a bit, need time to learn to use this new power. Maybe. It was a fragile hope.

Something caught her attention. She turned to the Russian. He was screaming, but she could barely hear it over the ebb-and-flow hum from the diagram all around her. She gaped in horror. His skin blackened, the hands battering against the barrier shrivelling and rotting before her eyes. Light poured from every orifice, even his eyes, oozing out like glowing serpents seeking to escape him and join the migratory tide of power. Without realizing she was doing it, Nea screamed.



Hecuba soared over the trees. She could feel the wind through her wingtips, delighting in it. Was this how Nea felt? Did she know this glory? This view? What *had* that crazy old man put in that cup?

A light flared off to her right, dim at first. She felt a pull towards it from deep within before she had even seen it. She arched towards it, banking around and gliding in. She was not alone in the sky. There were two other shapes in the air with her, formless, as she herself was really formless. She could not see wings spread out beside her as she turned to look at the others. She could not even see the other two, really, she just knew they were there.

They circled the light, which grew, rose into a column towards the sky. They could feel the power in it, the cold heat that threatened to sear them if they came too near. Hecuba stared into it, fascinated and drawn at the same time. She was looking for something that called to her. It was some while before she realized it was the light itself, its source that drew her.



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“The barrier is down,” came Joseph’s voice into the darkness in the car. “I repeat, the barrier is down.”

Thomas began to grab what he would need, strapping the pack at his waist, slipping the ear piece in and running the cord down inside his shirt. He clipped the walkie-talkie to his belt and plugged in the ear piece, testing everything. Gaganan was pressing buttons on the arm of the door, looking for the one that would open something. He was impatient to be off. He began cussing as he inadvertently locked the doors.

Thomas sighed. “Just hold on,” he complained. “I need you to stay where I can see you anyway. I’m liable to get lost out there if you don’t.”

“Be careful,” Henry said.

Thomas paused, met his friend’s eyes in the dim light from the dashboard. He took his hand, shook it firmly. “I won’t forget this,” he said.

“If you live long enough,” Henry retorted. He didn’t let go of the hand. “Thomas,” he added. Thomas paused. “Live long enough.”

The moment stretched out, tense and uncomfortable. Both men deeply touched. Thomas gave a tug on the hand holding his. “Like Julia could keep you and Hecuba from killing each other on her own,” he quipped.

The moment shattered. Henry chuckled and let go. “You’re on voice activation?” he asked.

Thomas double checked the mike device, nodded.

Henry unlocked the doors.

Gaganan hit the ground outside the second the door was open, looked both ways before darting into the woods on the far side of the road.

“Hey, wait up, Fuzz-butt!” Thomas complained.

An irritated meow answered him.

The phone in the car chirruped again. “You got the cat with you?” Joseph asked.

Henry answered. “Yeah, why?”

“Cause they just saw him.” Joseph gave a chuckle. “You know, we didn’t calculate not being able to see Thomas when they went hunting. Good thing you took the Nijji.”

“Neejee?” Henry asked.

“The familiar,” he summarized. “I’ll explain later. Just tell Thomas to keep near the cat and we can guide him better.”

“You think the cat knew that when he stowed away with us?”

Another laugh. “Probably.”

The Speaker

“Hey, Thomas,” he said into the walkie-talkie.

“Yeah?” he asked from the edge of the woods.

“Stick with the cat. Apparently they can see him but not you. They’ll guide you in that way.”

“Roger,” Thomas said.

“I’m not Roger, I’m Henry, remember?” he chuckled.

Thomas groaned. “Remind me to hit you later. Gaganan! Wait up!”

Behind them in the car, Henry held onto the steering wheel to steady himself, took a deep breath, blew it out slowly. “Dear God, let this all come out right in the end,” he whispered.

“What was that?” Thomas asked.

“Nothing,” Henry jumped, released his whitened knuckles from the wheel. “Nothing at all.”



Hecuba watched, fascinated as the small golden glow slowly worked its way closer to the large pulsing white one. She was tempted to circle down to it, to investigate, but the draw from the brighter was too strong. She knew the little one had to reach the larger, that was imperative. Then the light dimmed and commanded more of her attention. She circled lower.

It wasn’t going out. It was concentrating. She could see a glowing form, a man of light moving about just below the ground near her. It was like watching a house through heat vision lenses. She could see his intensity, see him moving, clear and bright, but nothing between him and her eyes. She knew there was a great deal separating them, a barrier she could not cross, but she could watch him to her heart’s content.

He bent over something, something that was apparent to her as a nothing, less than nothing, a hole. There was a gaping blackness he leaned over, poked with interest. Then he crossed to something else, something that she could see but barely. The other figure was crumpled in a heap that gave off less light than a piece of glow-in-the-dark plastic in a dim room. But it was a human form.

Behind her, she could feel the tiny glow coming closer.



The Speaker

Nea had fainted. Seeing that man wither away to an unwrapped mummy, knowing she had only narrowly avoided that fate herself was more than she could take.

Jonah poked at the body of the old Russian with interest. The robe lay on it like some practical joke played in a museum. It looked out of place, new and barely used, on the blackened, withered corpse. He looked as if he had been dead for centuries rather than minutes. That settled things. He would not be performing the Crucible on his Rosamund until he was well and surely done with her. Besides, he had no need of her barbaric powers now. Who needed the shape of beasts when he had the power to cow men's minds? He could feel that power coursing raw within him. He would have to exercise it, test it out on her.

Remembering her, he looked across the now inert circle. She lay in a heap where she had fallen. He crossed the circle. Some of the powders and shavings clung to her skin where she had fallen on the diagram when the barriers had dropped. She was alive, breathing, just in a dead faint. He smiled. What she had seen had put fear into her. That would be useful. She might be more pliant now. As he gathered her in his arms he wondered if that would take the fun out of her. Some of her appeal, not all of it, mind, but some of it, had been in her strength of will. Still, she was glorious when she suffered. He had no idea if all women transformed so, or if it was just this one. He would have to experiment before he cast this one away.

He carried her into her room. There was a great deal that now had to be done and he did not want her wandering about. He laid her on the bed, stood watching her for a long time. It would probably be best to leave the country for a while. Find some little out of the way place no one would find them, where no one would care, where money mattered more than law. Some sunny little Central American island? There were places in the Caribbean where they spoke French, places where a man of his power and influence could live like a king, experiment with the native girls to his hearts content, so long as he paid their families well enough. Yes. He would pack up everything and take her away. The hell with school, with becoming a doctor. He had only desired that route for the power it would provide him. He now had all that and more. He could return in the fall if he still wanted to.

Right now, the master's remains called. The charred little husk would have to be disposed of, but how? Burning it would smoke and stink and call attention to itself. There were neighbours, however distant. There was much they would overlook, but fire was not one of those things. Too great a risk this close to the Red Belt, all that

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dead foliage just waiting for a stray spark. No, he would just have to bury it. There was an abandoned bear's den not far from here. He had stumbled upon it once, nearly broken his leg falling into it while searching for fresh laurel leaves for the mast...no, he would never think of him in those terms again. He knew no name for the beast, knew only his nationality which he had not been able to hide. He had looked the word 'Raduka' up once. Discovered that it was Russian for viper. It had given him a clue to the man but not enough. Mayhap the tower would yield the rest. But first... "*Sephora!*"



Thomas could just see the cat ahead, a flicker of white in the moonlight. He had paused, was crouched, sniffing something. Henry's voice hissed low in his ear. "Stop, stop!" he pleaded urgently. "He's on the move."

Thomas tried to signal the cat who was just about to move into the next patch of shadow. He finally picked up a twig and tossed it at him. The cat nearly jumped out of his fur as it landed just ahead of him. He looked back, glaring, saw Thomas signalling him to come back. He sighed, and did so. There was something urgent about that hand gesture. Thomas tapped his earpiece and bent, opening his arms.

Gaganan stood on his hind legs and put his paws on the man's shoulder, allowing himself to be picked up. He pressed his ear to the thing in Thomas's ear, could just hear the voice buzzing through. "You got him? Just blow once for yes. Don't speak."

Thomas puffed once. "Apparently Jonah's on the move, about ten metres northeast of you and headed your way."

Thomas and the cat both turned to look, could barely make out the bob of a flashlight in the darkness amid the varied patches of moonlight. They waited behind a tree, barely breathing.

Jonah carried the brittle and surprisingly light body over his shoulder, wrapped in a blanket. He had a shovel in the other hand, just in case the den entrance had filled in more than expected. He was certain it had been this way, but things were hard to discern in the dark. His flashlight cast a pool of yellow light in front of him, protecting him from stumbling, but it did not help his orientation. The woods at night were transformed by light and shadow, and every sound sent up alarms. He was no longer worried about people. But he was concerned that the bear might have come back. He was not so sure of his powers against animals. Soon however, he

would never need be near one again.

He heard a sound to his right, something in the underbrush. He turned, flashed his light in that direction, trying to see what it could have been. Then, in a tree to his left he heard an owl hoot. He swung the beam in that direction, saw an owl perched on a limb still swaying from his sudden weight, with a mouse in its claws, still bleeding, the little legs shaking off their last twitches of life. He forced himself to take a deep breath and move on.

Jonah took a few steps, then paused, looked to the right again. He cast the light left, then right, settling on a rock about four metres beyond a gnarled oak. He recognized the shape of it. He was heading too far east. He immediately corrected his course.

Thomas and the cat silently inched their way around the trunk, keeping it between them and Jonah. They listened to his passing. The cat peeked, sniffing the air. Once Thomas was certain Jonah would have his back to them, he too, peeked. He saw the bundle over his shoulder and his hand slipped into his pocket, closed on the gun.

Gaganan felt movement against the fur of his tail, looked back to see the murderous look in Thomas's eye as he stepped to follow Jonah. His nose had already told him they were not interested in that blanket, but men are blind to that sort of thing and he could easily guess what Thomas was thinking. Gaganan threw himself at the passing leg, wrapping his arms around it and setting his claws just enough to make his point felt.

Thomas nearly yelled as the cat tackled him, felt the tips of needle claws just pierce the tender flesh of inner thigh. He stopped, looked down, tried to pull him off, glaring at the animal. The cat glared back, shaking his head furiously. Thomas pointed after Jonah, tapped his shoulder indignantly, too numb inside to fully register what he felt.

“Ok, coast is relatively clear,” came Henry's voice in his ear. “Turn immediately north. They think Nea's about a hundred metres that way.”

Thomas watched the bobbing light disappear from sight, dared to whisper, “I just saw him carrying a body in a blanket.” He was surprised how calm his voice was, considering how choked he felt.

There was a pause as Henry relayed the information and waited for a reply. “They say it was a nothing, a black hole. Not Nea. Repeat, Not Nea. She is dim but alive and north of you.” Thomas began to move immediately, the cat trotting along beside him. “North is a little more to your right, Thomas.”

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Without thinking, he adjusted, began scrambling over the rocky slope to the right of him.

Five minutes of climbing later he had almost reached the top. The cat had beat him there and disappeared. Just as his fingers touched asphalt at the top, Gaganan reappeared, meowing at him. He growled up at him. "I'm not as nimble as you," he hissed. Finally he pulled himself up the last steep bit and stood on the driveway dusting himself off. The cat bounded away towards a large Tudor styled house that rose ominously up out of the woods.

The house was a grand, two-story affair, with a drive that pulled around to the back of the house, which is what Thomas found himself staring up at. There was a tower jutting out on the right hand corner that began on the second floor and rose another floor above the roof. The cat was investigating the windows, every once in a while flicking an ear or an eye towards a path that ran from the opposite corner into the woods. Thomas headed for the back door, hoping that it had been left open and he wouldn't have to break in.

He stepped up onto the small deck and reached for the knob, paused to listen. The night was quiet, though there were rustlings of the wind in the trees, some night birds. There was no sound of human footsteps. To be safe he spoke softly into the mike, "Henry, where is he?"

"Hang on," came the voice. It seemed to take forever to get a reply. His hand strayed to the knob, afraid to turn it. "Two hundred metres southwest of the cat's current position. He is stationary. Nea is about four metres to his left and down. Don't know how you'll get there, but there you are."

"Thanks."

Thomas twisted the knob. There was a second's resistance, then it turned obediently. The hinges made no noise as he swung the door open. He hissed to get the cat's attention, waved him over. Gaganan had been trying to find a way up to an open window he had seen on the second floor, but an open door was better. He ran over, slipped inside. Thomas closed the door behind them.

He pulled the flashlight out of the pouch, cast it about on the floor so its light would not be seen from outside. "She here?" he asked Gaganan, who was sniffing around the kitchen they appeared to be in. "Can you find her?"

He didn't really expect the animal to answer, but he would have liked to have had a nod or a shake of the head at the very least. Gaganan had his nose to the floor, began to move out of the kitchen into the formal dining room. Thomas followed slowly, keeping his eyes open for other things. He saw a narrow door next

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to a sideboard and opened it, was disappointed to find a linen closet full of old tablecloths, napkins and expensive napkin rings. The dining room looked as if it had not been used in years, judging from the layer of dust on the dried flower arrangement on the table. Thomas was careful not to touch anything, not to disrupt any of the dust.

The cat suddenly sneezed, lifted his head, looking into the next room. Thomas paused in the entrance. The dining room door was a wide, yawning mouth that gaped into the living room beyond it. There was a heavy, rough stone fireplace and bulky antique furniture that looked designed more to impress than for comfort. From this doorway he could see the front door across a broad, empty atrium. It was an elaborate facade with etched glass panels and carved Tudor roses. He was just noticing a pattern in the tile-work of the atrium when the cat meowed, began trying to open a door he had not seen.

It was set into the wall just to the left of a curio cabinet full of enamelled and jewelled eggs, and cleverly hidden. The cat knew there was a way to open it, but just could not make it work. The latch would not budge. Thomas crossed to him, reached to lift it, when it sprang open under the cat's weight. The cat blinked up at him, both of them a little confused. The cat was determined not to look a gift horse in the mouth apparently, and disappeared into the opening. Thomas paused at the top of the steps, shining his light down and took a second to let Henry know what was going on. "You said she was down?"

"Yes. Have you found a way?"

"I'm at the top of the cellar stairs now. He moved?"

"Not that I've been told," Henry replied. "Must be burying whatever he was lugging. I'll let you know if he starts moving. Be careful. Hold on..." there was a pause. Thomas held his breath, praying he wasn't about to be told Jonah was on his way back. "She's about six metres to your left."

"You mean the cat's left?" he asked, shaking his head. He couldn't see the animal anymore.

"Yes, the cat's left. God, but it's weird saying that."

"Henry," he began, taking the first step into the cellar, "If that is the weirdest thing you've had to deal with the last few weeks, count yourself lucky."



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Henry frowned. "Repeat that?" he asked. "Count what?" There was no answer. Only static on the ear phones. "Thomas? Come back. I didn't hear you. Thomas, can you hear me? Thomas?" Panic rising, he snatched up the mobile and pressed the button. "Joseph, we've got a problem."

"What?" came the reply.

"I've lost contact with Thomas."

"Hold on." A few seconds later, "He follow the cat down?"

"As far as I know. I was hearing what sounded like wooden steps, when he cut out mid-sentence. I didn't hear a fall."

"Ok. Chances are there's something interfering with reception. If it was a fall you'd have heard something," said Joseph, but there was concern in his voice. "We'll just have to pray he leaves that cellar before the other gets back."

Somehow, this news did not make Henry any less worried.



Thomas did not like what he found in the cellar. There was the acrid scent of recently blown out candles and a charred smell of old decay that seriously worried him. The flashlight's pool showed him candle stands, some as tall as a man, lined up against one wall like some haphazard line of soldiers. Red and black wax ran down their sides in heavy, ropy threads. They cast shadows that made him jump when the light moved across them. There was something on the floor that glittered and crunched underfoot, but he could not take the time to wonder about it. He had to find the cat.

He heard a noise to his left and aimed the light that way. The cat was sniffing at a door. He looked back at Thomas as the light fell on him, his mouth half opened, his eyes lighting up like mirrored holes. He moved swiftly in that direction, noticed the line of light at the bottom edge of the door. The door gave easily to his hand, swung open with absolute silence. The cat paused in the frame, almost afraid to enter. He blinked up at Thomas.

The lights in this room were dim, came solely from a small reading lamp on a table to his right. The first thing that drew his eye was the bed and the still form lying on it. She was on her side, facing away from the door, her hair splayed out against the white shift she was dressed in. The angle of her body prevented him from being able to see if she was breathing. Panic rose and threatened to stop his

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own. Hesitantly, afraid to get close enough to discover she was not, he approached the bed, stood there a long moment, afraid to touch her, afraid not to.



Jonah knew something was not right. A strange sensation had passed over him. He needed to return to the house immediately; but it had taken him over ten minutes to get down here. A spell pressed itself to his mind, fulfilled his need for speed. He crossed the distance from the den to the house in a single moment.

Hecuba watched the gold light nearing the pale one. It got no closer, stayed three or four metres from it. Maybe there was a door in the way. A sense of urgency began to press against her bared soul. Behind her, to the south, she felt the thing she was drawn to, that she wanted to become one with but resisted, coming nearer, fast.

The instant Jonah's hand neared the knob on the back door he knew. It was unlocked. He had not bothered with mundane latches and deadbolts. He had no use for them anymore. Magic was a surer lock than anything man-made. But there it was, the door was unlocked, the magic rendered inert. He had known there was someone of power at the school. There had to have been. How else could Rosamund have broken the spell he had placed on her? It was certainly not that red-headed wannabe they had seen in the font that night. There had been another there, another shielded from him. Who ever it was, they were here. And they should not have been.

He entered the house quietly, casting his newly extended senses through the building. How had they found this place, he wondered. Every precaution had been taken. Unless...the raw power from the ritual...it had to have been. Unsealed, it would have been a beacon visible to everyone with the eyes to see it for kilometres. Ah well, he thought. No help for that now and no matter. He highly doubted there was anyone in this province or the next who could stop him now.



Thomas ran the back of his fingers down the length of her bronze arm, exhaled in relief as the skin shuddered beneath his touch. Her skin was cool, but the room was cold. He set his hand on her shoulder, brushed away the threads of her hair from her face. "Nea," he whispered, rolling her towards him.

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It was a nightmare. He had returned, the burning fingers stroking her arm reigniting earlier pain. She shuddered, tried to fall deeper into the oblivion that had held her until that moment. But before the hand touched her shoulder, other fingers moving her hair from her face; before the name that *he* never used was spoken, she noticed something else. A warmth, like a safety net had just dropped over her. She opened her eyes, blinked. Her nose told her reality clearer than her unfocused eyes. She turned, not daring to believe that her eyes were not deceiving her. “Thomas?” she whispered.

“Kitten,” he exclaimed softly, pulling her into his arms.

She returned the embrace, ignoring the pain that seemed to erupt in micro explosions everywhere he touched her. She gave a wordless cry, which he took for joy. He was partly right.

A weight hit the bed, a sarcastic voice drifted into existence mid-sentence. *... finish the rescue before we start the kissing scene?*

She turned in Thomas’s arms, saw Gaganan and swept him up, burying her face deep in his fur. *Hey, hey!* he squawked. *I missed you too, but let’s be practical. We’re still in the viper’s nest here and he’ll be back.* He complained, but he was purring, licked her cheek.

Thomas took the moment to alert the others. “I have her. Repeat, I have Nea,” he said. There was no answer.

She let Gaganan go, slid off the bed as if afraid it might suddenly attempt to swallow her up and hold her there. The floor was cold against her feet, pain at every step. Thomas saw her falter and grabbed her.

“What is wrong? Has he hurt you?” he asked, forgetting all about the walkie talkie.

“More than you can know,” she said, dismissively. “Don’t worry about it. Just...” The light glinted off the bracelets, catching her attention. “Damn it. Can you get these off me?”

“What?” he asked, “Why? Can’t they wait?”

She shook her head. “If we get separated... he can control me with them. I can’t take that chance.”

Not completely understanding, he pulled the Leatherman from his pocket and flipped it open like an expert. He slid the silver band between the jaws of the tool and snapped. Two bites cut through the bracelet with a spark. Nea twisted the thing off with a violence that surprised him, threw the beautiful object across the room. Once the other one had been clipped, she repeated the process as he folded the tool and put it back in his pocket. “Ok, *now* we can go,” she breathed, rubbing her wrists.

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Something had suddenly screamed at Jonah's senses, something wrong. Not a presence, but an absence. He could find no sign of the intruder, nor could he sense the woman he had put to sleep a little while ago. Surely they could not have gotten in and her out in the short time that had passed between his noticing something was wrong and arriving at the door. That was what he had sensed, he knew it now: her dropping off his mystic radar. He strode immediately for the cellar door.



The cat led the way into the other room. Thomas took her hand and ran after him. The cat was on the fourth step, Thomas and Nea halfway across the room, when the lights flipped on. Gaganan slithered between the steps and dropped into the shadows under the stairs. The two humans froze. They would not reach the stairs in time to hide where the cat had, and returning to her room was something Nea was not willing to do. The only other exit was across the room behind a door that might be locked. They were in the middle of the large room, standing in what remained of the pentagram, a fact which made Nea very uncomfortable.

Thomas slipped his hand in his pocket, straightened his back and set Nea behind him. He stood like a warrior facing down an entire line of cavalry, determined and sure of himself. Nea clung to him, made herself as small as she could behind him.

Jonah walked calmly down the stairs into the basement. Presence was everything. If they were here they were caught, pure and simple. Nothing they could do. He willed the door closed behind him, stopped on the steps and turned as soon as his head cleared the ceiling. He was not pleased by what he saw. Thomas faced him with more calm and daring than he could possibly have been feeling, but then he had no idea what he was dealing with. Jonah grinned, leaned his forearm on the edge of the ceiling above his head and regarded them. "Well, well, well, isn't this a surprise?" he chuckled. He was in complete control. No matter that the boy clutched something so desperately in his jacket pocket, iron courage. What were lead projectiles compared to *Agonare*? "I dare say, you were the last person I expected to see. Not that I thought you wouldn't come looking, but... *you*? A mage? Hard luck Harlan? You have lived up to your name."

There was something different about Jonah, something far older and more serpentine in his eyes than Thomas remembered. Something infinitely more dangerous. But Thomas had an ace up his sleeve. No, better than an ace, he had a full fledged wild card. “The game is over, Jonah. Step aside and let us by or as God is my witness you will regret it.”

Jonah laughed. “As God is your witness?” he mocked. “God’s eyes cannot reach here. You are beyond even her precious spirits,” he said, nodding to Nea. “The only ones who dwell here will not help her. You cannot help her. Rosamund, come to me,” he ordered, exerting his will on the bands.

“No,” she said flatly from behind Thomas. “Never again.”

“Are you forgetting? You will obey me!” he roared, furious that somehow they were not working. Had he overlooked something in taking the Russian’s power? Had it changed him so much that the bands no longer obeyed him? No matter, that could be fixed.

Nea slipped her arms through Thomas’s, raised them up and displayed her bare wrists to Jonah. “Lose something?”

He scowled. How the hell had she... no matter. He forced himself to remain calm. He would punish her dearly for this, make her watch Thomas’s suffering as he destroyed him. There was room in that bear’s den for two bodies.... “So you’ve slipped your leash,” he sneered casually. “No matter. I have others. *Askath!*” he roared, thrusting his will like a mace at Thomas.

Thomas raised an eyebrow, tightened his grip on the gun. “Cussing is a sign of weakness Jonah, whatever language you use.”

Jonah stared dumbfounded. Had he done it right? That spell should have rocked his head back on his peasant shoulders. He had felt the power leave him, but there was no effect. “*Agonare!*” he cried, aiming again. This one he knew well. This one would not fail.

Thomas felt Nea flinch at that word. The arms wrapped around him from behind stiffening. Whatever that had been meant to do, she had known it and feared it. “What’s the matter, Jacobi?” he asked calmly. “Your magic wand out of charges? Or does it only work on women?”

Jonah waited a moment, remembered the first casting had taken time to affect her. But nothing seemed to be happening. He tried it on her. She should have folded up screaming instantly. Instead, he saw her face peer around Thomas’s shoulder curiously, saw a smile beginning. He focused his senses, looking at them in a different way. Magic surged all around them, the tendrils of his will striking at them

like hungry serpents. But something was blocking it. As the tendrils struck, they vanished a metre and a half out from them, as if all magic ceased to exist from that point on. He flooded the cellar with magic, exerting his will, attempting to crush them through sheer force. But there seemed to be a shield, a bubble of something beyond which the magic just ceased to exist.

He suddenly noticed her face begin to change. There was a low growl that filled the room. Jonah stared as her jaw slowly opened, her lip curling up, splitting, white streaks appearing under her eyes and around her mouth. The hands on the front of Harlan's jacket spread, the fingers thickening.

Thomas set a hand on Nea's paw, warning her not to stray too far. He felt the silky skin grow velvet fur beneath his fingers, made a point to expose and lift one of the massive claws. Nea let go of him, set herself on all fours, lazily began to stalk towards the stairs. Thomas made sure he stayed within two metres of her. Behind Jonah, he noticed a pair of long white furred arms reaching out between the steps, slowly approaching his calf, claws extended. "I would strongly suggest you back off Jonah," Thomas warned. "I don't know what you've done to her, and at that size I don't have the strength...or the will, really, ...to keep her from killing you."

Jonah had been gaping, wide-eyed at the change. He had assumed she could only do small, harmless things, useful only as modes of transportation. It had never occurred to him she could be dangerous as well. He had also assumed that the barrier that prevented his magic from working, would also prevent hers. She placed a paw on the bottom step, her shoulder blades rising above her back as she crouched, ready to spring. Suddenly there was a yowl and something sharp pierced the flesh of his calf. He yelled, ripped himself free, bolted up the stairs and slammed the door, locking it magically without thinking.

Nea bent and sniffed between the stairs, began licking the arms that were still protruding. Both felines were laughing. *Perfect timing, angel,* she purred.

Yeah, well, I'm a little stuck so...send the Shield around for a boost if you don't mind? he snickered.

Nea melted back into herself, reaching her hands into the gap to help him. "Thomas, could you..." she asked, nodding her head off the side of the staircase. He nodded and vanished underneath.

Between the two of them, they unwedged the cat from the dusty pile of junk he had slipped into and up onto the steps.

"Henry," Thomas said into the mike, "I need to know where he is. And why didn't you tell me he was back?" Nothing responded, not even hissing. "Henry?"

Nea noticed the earpiece and microphone for the first time. "What's the

matter?”

“I think,” he said, lifting his jacket and checking the base unit, “that I’ve lost the signal.”

“We need to go. He’s probably away from the door by now,” she advised, gathering up her skirts and disappearing up the steps. Thomas hurried to catch up. Both her and the cat pressed their ears to the door, heard nothing on the other side. She reached for the handle. It would not move. “He locked it.”

“Let me,” he said, reaching around her. He set his hand on the door and flipped off the basement lights, slowly twisted the handle, opening the door about 10 centimetres.

Gaganan stuck his head out, blinking in the darkness beyond. He crept out first, slinking across the floor, looking everywhere for signs of Jonah. There were none. Moonlight shone through the ornate glass panels in and beside the front door to his left, and through the kitchen windows to his right, enough for him to see by, but probably not the two behind him. He chirruped the all clear and moved out of the way, pushing the door the rest of the way open.

Nea left the safety of the basement stairs, crept into the living room behind Thomas. Her eyes had to adjust, but did so quickly. She was tempted to shift to cat form, to be able to see better, but then she would not be able to warn or guide Thomas. *Which way out?* she asked Gaganan.

Front door is closest, he said. *But there’s a room to the left of it and an opening to the right and I cannot see into them. Easy ambush. The kitchen is just a room away with no exits other than to the dining room, which you have to go through anyway. Your call.*

She whispered to Thomas. “No sign. Front or back door?”

“We came in the back. Might be easier,” he replied.

“Thomas?” came the yelp in his ear. Thomas jumped. He had written the walkie talkie off as useless. It had not occurred to him that the basement might have been the problem.

“God, Henry,” he hissed. “You scared the hell out of me. What happened?”

“That’s my question,” he snapped. “When they told me that Jonah had reached you, I panicked and called the police. They’re on their way.”

“God, that could be fifteen minutes out here,” Thomas groaned.

“More like five. A patrol unit passed me not long after you cut out. Hold on.”

Nea and Thomas crouched in the darkness as they waited, listening to every noise, starting at every shadow. Gaganan stalked his way into the dining room,

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checking out the path to the back door. He had not gotten past the forest of chairs when Henry's voice exploded in Thomas's ear, so loud that even Nea heard the ear unit buzz. "Get out! He's upstairs and headed straight for you!"

As Thomas reached his hand out to grab Nea and pull her towards the dining room, the door to the basement exploded beside them. Thomas grabbed her and lunged out of the way, slamming his back against the nearest wall beside a liquor cabinet and cradling her in his arms, shielding her with his body. He pulled the pistol out, ready for anything. Gaganan dove deeper under the table, out of sight from the open doorway.

In the car nearly a quarter of a kilometre away, Henry ripped the headphone out of his ear.

Jonah found himself on his butt on the steps, his head throbbing, his ears ringing, his right shoulder hurting like hell and the arm hanging limp. He had dislocated it. Shotguns were apparently very different from rifles. Thankfully he had cast that spell upstairs to allow him to see in the dark. The moonlight filtering through the front glass was as good as sunlight to him right now. He could see the remains of the cellar door swinging freely on the hinge, a large chunk of it missing from the middle. He did not see his targets anywhere, but they could not have gotten far. He could just see the back door from here, and the path they would have to take to get to it. He decided to try to taunt them out. "You think you've won, Harlan?" he said, speaking louder than he intended and trying to keep the pain out of his voice. He turned sideways to the wall, facing up the stairs, steeling himself for what he knew he had to do.

Gaganan hissed from the other room. *The house-breaking kit! At his waist, there might be something useful,* he suggested.

Nea slipped her hands to Thomas's waist, feeling for the hip pouch. "What are you..." he mouthed.

"Keep him talking," she whispered.

"I have her, you don't," Thomas shouted.

Jonah had been through a dislocated shoulder before, remembered some of the pre-med classes he had already attended. It was better if he could pull it straight out. He could slam it into the wall, possibly chip the socket in the process, but the best way required another person. He had to do this himself, could not risk the handicap. He set himself, gritted his teeth, forcing his arm out to the side at the right level and locked his fingers around one of the rails holding up the banister and, taking a deep breath, jerked with the rest of his body. Pain exploded in his brain, threatening to

black him out. He had missed. “Really,” he choked, made it sound more like suppressed laughter than suppressed pain. “But you are still under my roof.” He pulled again, this time successfully. A guttural cry was torn from his throat against his will.

Nea’s hands closed on a sharp bundle, felt the coarse fuzziness of what had to be a tennis ball against the back of her fingers. She heard the grunt, realized what it meant. “He’s hurt,” she hissed. “Run.” She led the way, dropped what she had her hand on. It tumbled out of the pouch to the floor.

Jonah saw the movement beyond the doorway. The shotgun blast had nearly deafened him but his sight was better than fine. He snatched up the shotgun with his left hand and fired again, from the hip this time just as the edge of Nea appeared beyond the door-frame

As the fabric of the couch shredded in front of her, Thomas pulled her back to the wall where they were before. He had no idea if Jonah was using a pump action shotgun or not, couldn’t take the chance of bolting again until he knew how long it would take to get another shell into the chamber. One thing he knew for certain, as Jonah himself was probably just figuring out, was that he would have to get closer to do any damage.

“*Indolora*,” Jonah gasped. His arm went numb immediately. His right hand felt almost club-like, unresponsive now but he could open and close it enough to hold the shotgun and open the chamber. He reloaded with his left hand. “Not smart, my girl,” he said. “I told you once before I do not share. Do you really think I will let you leave here alive with him?”

“And I’ve told you before,” Nea growled. “Death would be preferable to life in your hands.”

Thomas crouched against the wall feeling in his hip pouch for the jacks as he listened for the sound of a pump sliding a new shell into the chamber. What he heard instead was the click of shells sliding home. That meant two more shots to dodge then they could bolt provided he could find the bloody jacks and keep him from getting any closer.

“*What are you looking for?*” she whispered in Ojibwe.

“A bag of jacks” he replied softly, there being no word for the toy in her tongue.

She looked down on the floor beside them. She had kicked something when he pulled her back to safety. She felt around, closed her hand on the spiky net bag and ripped it open, reaching around the wall and pitching the lot into the atrium.

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Jonah saw the bright glints fly through the air, arcing harmlessly to the floor less than two feet from him. Their points glistened sharply to his heightened senses. If they had been meant to hit him they fell quite short of the mark. However, it would make closing the necessary distance slow and dangerous.

Jonah slowly descended the last couple of steps, moved to the area that was not peppered with the bright caltrops. ‘Damn him but the boy is clever,’ he thought. ‘A regular bloody boy scout.’

“It doesn’t matter what you try to do, Jacobi,” Thomas called, palming the revolver. “It’s over. I have her and the police are on their way.”

“Oh really?” he chuckled. “You expect me to believe you called the cops before breaking into my house?” But the news of the police if it was true made things more urgent. He had to deal with this now, draw Thomas out. He had thought before that he might have had a gun in his pocket. If he did he might be lured into trying to use it. “How does it feel, Harlan, to know that I had her first?”

Surprisingly, it was Nea who responded. She laughed, “You keep thinking that,” she taunted. She had seen Thomas colour at the remark. His fears at what had been done to her confirmed. She pressed against him trying to keep him from doing anything stupid.

Jonah was thrown off guard, his own face colouring in the dark. “What? Impossible! There was blood!”

“You were rough,” she retorted.

Thomas heard the hammer draw back, tucked Nea into him and curled around her to shield her from whatever was about to come.

The wall behind them erupted. Nea yelped like a wounded bird as something hot sliced across the exposed portion of her upper arm. Thomas’s body rocked forward as chunks of wood and shards of panelling and sheet-rock sprayed them from behind. Glass showered down on them from the cabinet beside them. Thomas felt his right arm going numb, a trickle of blood running down the inside of his shirt.

Nea popped her head up. The hole he had left in the wall was three feet wide, she could just see Jonah through it. He was reloading. He had shot both barrels at once, and was standing in the perfect spot to pick them off if they bolted. She turned, casting her eyes across the room, looking for any other means of escape, and noticed the fall of shadows against the fireplace wall as a cloud drifted by the moon, a flickering of light change. She reached into the pouch at Thomas’s hip, startling him with her fervour. She snagged the tennis ball and darted soundlessly on bare feet towards a second opening to the atrium. As she neared it, she noticed that

it did not open into the atrium directly, but onto a hallway that lead into some kind of office or study. She threw the ball into the hall. It bounced crazily, eventually knocking something over in the dark room.

Jonah's head snapped in that direction. He had forgotten about that entrance off the living room. He smiled. If they had run there, they were trapped. He stepped in that direction, leaned against the wall and peered down the hall. He could see nothing down there, though a lamp was lying on the floor just inside the study door. He took one slow step towards it when he heard two things in rapid succession. First: a scurrying from the other side of the wall where his targets had been. Second: the crunching of tires on the driveway out front.

He turned and saw the flickering of red and blue lights through the glass. He fumed silently, took a step into the shadows by the hall, melting into them as he had in the grove.

Nea and Thomas had just reached the dining room when the light from out front flashed over something bright in the kitchen. He stopped, turned. Through the ornately etched glass he could just see a flashlight held high and the hint of red and blue lights flickering in the background. He pulled her to a stop, gasped as the action jarred his right shoulder. He ripped off his hip pack, stuffed the gun into it and unclipped the walkie talkie from his belt. "Henry," he whispered into the mic. "The Police are here. I'm sending the cat to you with the kit, my walkie talkie and Dad's piece. Wait for him, then head to the hospital. I'm sure that's where they'll be taking us shortly. Do you copy?"

Henry had pulled the ear piece out of the walkie talkie, had been listening normally. He picked up the unit, his ears still ringing. "Wait for the cat, roger." He then picked up the phone and relayed the information to Joseph.

Thomas's shoulder was killing him and his hand felt cold and numb, he couldn't make his fingers do anything. He handed Nea the pack, the gun and the radio, pulling the earpiece out and the wire out of his shirt. "*Put these in,*" he whispered in Ojibwe, in case he could be heard. "*Put them on Gaganan and send him back to Henry.*" He looked down at the cat as he came out from under the china cabinet and jumped up onto the table. "*I know you may not want to leave her, but we'll be safe now. Get these things out of here. It wouldn't do to be caught with them.*"

I want to stay with you, he insisted, licking the wound on Nea's arm.

There was a knocking at the door that went unanswered, a voice announcing police presence.

You can't, she replied, snapping the pack around his waist and adjusting it to fit. *They're not going to let you go where they have to take me. Then I'd have to

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explain you and that would....*

Not be good, got you, he finished for her. *See you soon,* he said. The moment the pack was adjusted he bolted for the back door, easing it open and slipping out without a sound.

Thomas pulled her to him with his left arm, crouched against the china cabinet and waited. He peered around the corner, saw the light drift away from the door. "They're leaving?" he gasped.

"Or going around the back," she moaned. They couldn't have that yet. Nea screamed.

Within moments the front door had been kicked in and two policemen poured in, guns out, announcing their presence loudly.

Nea called out, "Be careful! He was by the stairs! He's got a loaded shotgun!"

"Where are you?"

"Straight ahead, in the dining room," she replied. She did not have to fake the fear and relief in her voice. She was terrified Jonah would shoot the police. "He went down that hall off the front room I think."

In the back, they could hear his partner calling for back up. "Who are you?" he asked, creeping cautiously closer, obviously checking out the side hall. "Clear," he said to his partner.

"Sooneawa Majiwe. I was kidnapped. I am not alone."

"Who's with you," came the other voice, trying to keep her talking. "Parlour clear. Open door to the left."

"My fiancé."

Thomas sank to the floor beside her, partly in relief, partly because he was feeling a bit weak.

"How badly are you hurt?"

"Not much," she answered.

"Bad," Thomas called.

She whirled. "What?! Where?"

His voice was raspy, pained as she jostled him trying to find his injury. "Easy! That last shot. I think I got part of the wall in my shoulder."

She was mortified. "And I was going on about my little scratch." She eased him forward, felt the blood on her hands, something protruding from the shoulder, the blood dark against the faded denim. "*Oh, my heart!*"

A flashlight pool fell on them, made Nea jump. She had been so intent on Thomas's wound she had not heard him approach. It could have been Jonah and

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she would never have known. The policeman's hand took her elbow, drew her up and away, moved to help Thomas up. "Let's get you to safety," he said softly. "The first floor's clear. We'll wait for back up before checking out the second story."

"He's bleeding badly," she said, taking Thomas's good arm and helping him unnecessarily towards the back door.

"I know," the policeman said. "He's left a trail. Come on, out you go."

His partner was at the back door holding it for them, keeping his eyes peeled for any sign of the reported assailant.

As they stepped out into the cool night they could hear the scream of sirens in the distance coming up the mountainside.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE:

Curses...

Nea entered Thomas's hospital room alone. The others were taking care of last minute things with the inspector down the hall or checking her out. He seemed asleep, but opened his eyes groggily as she neared the bed. "Kitten," he smiled weakly, reached out his good hand towards her. She took it in both of hers, kissed the fingers.

"Why didn't you tell me you were shot?" she chided.

"What would you have done?" he countered.

"Things a damned sight different than risking you bleeding out. I'd have," she dropped her voice, "shifted and torn him limb from limb while he was reloading for one."

"Better that you didn't," he said, reaching up with his fingers to caress her cheek. "Besides, I wasn't shot. I took shrapnel from the wall."

She looked over at the heavily bandaged shoulder and the sling holding his arm still. "How bad is it? They wouldn't tell me."

"Bad enough. They repaired the damage in time. My fingers are starting to be on pins and needles already. The shard of two-by-four that I carried around for a bit actually kept me from bleeding out. However, they are afraid it might cause an infection, so I have to stay tonight for antibiotics. Doc said something about releasing me tomorrow morning after twenty-four hours observation. Speaking of which," he added, looking her over. She was wearing her own clothes, and not the white shift she had been in when he had last seen her, just before they rushed him

into surgery. “You appear to be on your way home.”

She nodded. “The girls brought me some clothes. The doctors are done with the physical exam, not that it’ll reveal anything. I told them what he did to me left no marks.”

He fingered the darker marks on her wrist, where the bands had bruised her flesh when she had resisted their power. “Not completely.” Another thought occurred to him. He had heard the words ‘rape kit’ from a nurse passing his door as she handed it off to an officer. “Listen, I will understand if you don’t want to... you know... for while... if ever...”

She took his hand, pressed it tight against her cheek. “Are you crazy? I’m going to want to get right back up on that horse as soon as possible. I don’t want to develop any phobias,” she grinned. She saw the pained look in his eyes, got serious. “Thomas, my Medicine Shield, I love you. Nothing will change that. What he did to me can be forgotten with loving attention. If he *had* been the first, it might be different, but he wasn’t. I know what it’s supposed to be like.”

This seemed to comfort him, though even he was not sure why it did. He turned his attention to the silver streak in her hair, twisting the lock around his fingers. “I’ve never actually seen this.”

“It was exposed, bold as brass, when you pulled me out of that bed,” she smiled.

“I was kind of focused on other things. Besides, it was tucked under.” He thought about it a moment, observing the overall effect. “I kind of like it.”

She chuckled. “Well, don’t get used to it. I’ll be having it dyed as soon as I can.”

“Did I break that magic or did he?”

She sighed. “He did. I left behind the things preserving the spell. Eventually it washed out. I was overdue to get it redone anyway.”

His eyes drifted to her bare neck. The significance of her still loose hair finally occurring to him. “Your medicine bag... the feathered braid...”

She nodded. “I know. The police found them in that other room in the cellar. But they have to keep them for evidence. They swear I’ll get them back when he’s been convicted.”

“If they ever catch him,” he growled, surly. “Or did they? I was out a while, it’s...” he glanced at the clock. “Wow, three a.m.!”

She shook her head. “Hecuba and Anang insist he was still in the house when we were pulled out. Still there when they finally ended the ritual, even though the police insist he’s not.” He started to say something in anger and frustration but she

covered his lips with her fingers, and made him lay still. “They had to. They were more concerned with us, and to continue longer would have been too dangerous to them. If anyone of them had come face to face with him without one of us to divide his attention, they might have gone to him, been affected by him.”

He sighed. “But that means he’s still out there.”

She nodded. “Yes. But now he’s hunted. He’s lost a great deal. They know without a doubt it was him. DNA confirms it. *And*,” she added, lowering her voice and shifting to Ojibwe, “*I told the inspector that I watched him ritually murder his mentor. You yourself told them that he was carrying a body through the woods with a shovel. Though if they ever find the body they’ll never be able to pin it on him.*”

“Why not?”

She shook her head. “*You didn’t see the condition it was in. There is no way it was killed tonight. It was all black, like it had been charred but not, cause his white hair was still mostly in. He looked... as if he’d been dead for decades. Almost mummified, but wet mummified, like that cave man they found in the ice some years ago.*”

A voice interrupted them. “All right. I hate to break this up, but visiting hours are past over and he needs sleep.”

They looked up to see the nurse bustling in with the equipment to check his vitals. The nurse saw Nea, seemed to recognize her and blushed.

“Can’t I stay the night?” she pleaded. “Others were permitted when I was here.”

The nurse shook her head. “Others can stay. *You* have to rest yourself. Dr. Marcelle says *you* can’t stay.”

Nea moved to the other side of the bed to give the nurse access to his good arm, said her goodbyes. “I’m not sure I’m comfortable leaving you here with him on the loose,” she complained.

“I’ve been told there will be an officer stationed at my door all night... er, morning,” he said. “I’m more worried about you. Where are you staying? The apartment or the Redbirds?”

“With Star,” she said, not wanting to be direct in the presence of others for some reason. No one not versed in Ojibwe would know Anang meant Star. “I’ll be protected. And probably watched.” She bent and gave him a prolonged kiss.

“Miss?” the nurse said, clearing her throat with a bit of embarrassment. Nea looked up, confused. “I would very much like to get an accurate blood pressure

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reading,” she said, feeling the heart rate speed up beneath the fingers on his wrist.

“Oh, sorry,” she blushed. “I’ll go.”

She called back to Nea before she opened the door. “Miss Majiwe?”

Nea turned. “Yes?”

It seemed to be a bit difficult for the woman to say what she wanted to. But finally, “Would you... wait for me outside the room? I’ll just be two minutes.”

“Um, sure,” she said, and left the room.

She waited outside, asking the officer guarding the door a few questions, making sure he knew what to look for. She took great care to describe Tolby and Coleman too in case he used them again. “They weren’t there at the house nor the kidnapping that I saw, but they do flavors for him. I just don’t think we should take the chance.”

“Understood, ma’am. My orders are that no one but the staff I’ve already been introduced to, those people standing over there,” he nodded to the knot where Anang, Joseph, and Henry were standing with Julia and Hecuba, “and yourself are permitted in. And the inspector of course,” he added.

“Thank you.”

The nurse exited Thomas’s room, closing the door behind her. “If you would follow me, please?” she asked, gesturing down the hall.

The officer stopped her. “Within sight, if you please, Mirja? No chances.”

“Oh, right. Just over here to the nurse’s station. This is confidential,” she explained.

Nea was aware that the woman was embarrassed about something, uncertain. She followed, curious. When the nurse stopped Nea walked just past her, so that the officer had full view of her, even though it meant the nurse had her back to him. The nurse, Mirja, seemed more comfortable with that.

“It’s not about Mr. Harlan, I assure you. You can relax about that. It’s about you....”

Nea waited patiently.

Finally, it seemed to explode from her, though she kept her voice down. “Listen. I am terribly sorry about all of this. The man told me he was your fiancé, well... that he was going to ask you to be. I don’t know what came over me. It isn’t policy, you know.”

Nea set a hand on her arm trying to calm her. “What are you talking about?”

She took a deep breath. “The inspector talked to me right after you were taken. Asked me all about the man who brought you the roses.”

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“Roses?” she echoed, panic rising in her gorge.

“When you came to the hospital earlier in the year for exhaustion? I was the one who checked you in. I even let that cat stay in there with you when I caught him in the middle of the night. Before your friends arrived a man came with flowers, showed me this gorgeous diamond ring. He sweet-talked me into letting him see you for just a moment, said he was going to ask you to marry him. I don’t know why I let him in....”

Nea took control, suddenly understanding. “It wasn’t your fault. You had no way of knowing. He is very charming. If he had wanted to I’m fairly sure he could have convinced *you* to run away with him. Few women can resist him.”

“You did,” she said, judging herself harshly.

“I had more than enough reason. Before he approached me he said some things in my presence that could be considered... racial slurs. I disliked him intently before he ever tried to charm me. I guess that’s why he fixated on me.” ‘Well, it was partly true,’ she told herself. “I forgive you. No harm came of that visit,” she said, though knew that it was a lie the moment she said it. It was the only time he could have gotten a hold of the things Hecuba had said were necessary for the spell he had cast on her. “The important thing is that you resist him now if he should show up.”

Mirja stood straighter, her resolve iron clad. “Oh, don’t you worry, Miss. I have a very short list of those who get to see that young man. No one will get past it. And you don’t need to worry about him now. We got all the splinters during surgery and we have him on the strongest antibiotics available. The wood shouldn’t cause him any trouble. And he’ll have full use of that arm in a few weeks.”

“Thank you.” They did not have time to say anything else as Joseph caught her attention and gestured her over. She excused herself and went to join them, leaving Mirja to get herself together. “What is it?”

“You need to get home and get some rest,” he began. He cut her off as she began to protest. “Doctor’s orders. Think you can drive the truck? It’s a stick.”

“Yes. Why?”

“I’m staying with Thomas tonight. Henry’s going to take the girls to the apartment but Anang doesn’t drive,” he said, handing her the keys.

“I’ll get her home. That where Gaganan is?”

Joseph shook his head. “No, he’s outside pacing the hood. He was with Henry. Apparently he couldn’t be smuggled in this time,” he chuckled. He hesitated, then gave her a hug. “You be careful. Don’t take any chances. *I believe the inspector has someone watching the house, so don’t do anything...questionable in front of the*

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windows,” he advised, shifting to Ojibwe. “*I’ve already told him you’ll be sleeping at my house.*”

She nodded. “*Thank you for everything. You think you can handle him if he shows?*”

He laughed. “*So long as I stay within two metres of Thomas, I can’t see how he can do anything to me.*”

“*Except shoot you,*” she muttered ruefully, then walked back to the others with him.

Joseph kissed his wife and disappeared into Thomas’s room with a nod to the guard.

“The Mounties ain’t takin’ no chances, are they?” Julia commented as they headed for the elevator.

Henry gave a snort. “Their man slipped the net. They’re just covering their collective asses.”

“That’s not very nice,” Hecuba growled.

“You told me yourself they walked right past him,” he snarled back.

Nea noticed something different in the way they battled. It was subtle, but there. She tried not to grin.

“Not their fault they can’t see through his spells.”

“Will ya’ll quit bick’rin?” Julia snapped with an exasperated sigh.



When Nea got Anang home she insisted on curling up on the couch with Gaganan. Anang had offered to take the couch but Nea refused, wouldn’t even let her pull out the sofa-bed. She did not refuse the offered pillow though, not once she got a whiff of it. It smelled of Thomas and she was more than happy to curl into it. Making sure the curtains were closed, she changed into a flannel nightshirt and her suede bikini bottoms. The police had needed her silk ones, claimed them for evidence. She turned out the light and shifted to cat form, curled up on the pillow, spent several minutes kneading it before Gaganan got fed up with it and began to lick her face, lulling her to sleep.

Her dreams were fitful, but not plagued by the monstrous things that had attacked her the night before. Unfortunately, Jonah did, though the ever-present scent of Thomas and Gaganan helped to alleviate the fear.

She woke with a start to the sound of knocking on the door. Anang bustled in,

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telling whoever it was to hold their horses. She saw the two cats on the couch and immediately shooed the smaller one. “*Go get dressed*,” she hissed.

She waited until Nea had run down the hall on silent padded feet before gathering her dressing gown more tightly around her and peeking out the window. She then unlocked the door and opened it. “Boozhoo, Inspector. Good morning. Nea’s getting dressed. Can I offer you some coffee?”

The inspector stepped in after wiping his feet first. “Thank you, Mrs. Redbird I would love that. I’m sorry for getting you ladies up so early after the late night, but I have to clear a few more things up with Miss Majiwe.”

“Oh, no problem at all,” she chirped, moved into the kitchen and began to make some coffee.

The inspector had a seat at the table and waited patiently.

Nea did not keep him waiting long. “Morning, Inspector,” she said. “I’ll get that Anang. You go get dressed.”

To her surprise Anang let her. She set a deep skillet of oil on the back burner and turned it on before disappearing into the back of the house. Nea poured the Inspector and herself a cup as soon as it was ready. She joined him at the table. “When can I get my clothes back, Inspector?” she asked immediately, noticing from the clock behind him that it was nearly ten in the morning.

“It shouldn’t be long before I know that. If there’s no trace evidence it could be tomorrow. If there is...” he shrugged.

She sighed. “They are important to me. They were a gift from my friends and I do not have many others,” she said pointedly. “But you did not come to talk to me of underwear.”

He gave a slightly embarrassed grin, sipped his coffee. “You are right there. When we searched the house we found a few odd things and were wondering if you could explain them.”

“Like?”

“Well, the symbol on the floor for one. The chest of drawers full of shaved metals and pungent, unidentified powders. The nature of the books on the shelves. Some of them we still don’t know what language they’re in. I know you said you never went upstairs until Mr. Harlan pulled you out but did you know that cabinet by the basement door contained genuine Faberge eggs?”

She thought about it. “No, but it makes sense. The other man who was with him, he was Russian. Did you ever find his body?”

He shook his head. “No. We found one, shoved in an old bear’s den a few

hundred metres below the house, but it couldn't be his. Though whoever it was suffered a gruesome death. The poor man was shot at least three times that we can tell, stabbed and slashed multiple times and his... organ chopped off." He mistook her reaction completely. "But we cannot be certain Jacobi had anything to do with it. Maybe this other man. According to the records Mr. Jacobi is only twenty-two and this body has been dead for more than that. We are still combing the woods for the Russian man's body, though we are beginning to believe this mysterious corpse is the one Mr. Harlan saw him carrying."

"What makes you think that?" she asked.

"Fibre evidence. And the blanket that we found on the back porch. We believe it was something he discovered in the house and removed. You say he stabbed him?"

She shook her head. "I said he ritually murdered him. You wanted to know about the symbols on the floor. I don't understand them, but I know they put me in one part of it. I think the other man had intended me for a sacrifice, but Jonah had other plans and killed him instead. It was all part of some ritual magic," she gave a forced laugh, "if you believe such things."

Anang bustled back into the kitchen twisting her hair up. The oil was already starting to pop as she pulled a container of batter from the fridge. She began making a fresh batch of fry bread without a word to either of them.

"As for the other things, I could not tell you. I only saw that room twice."

"I hate to keep bringing you back to this, but... I have to know how he killed him, what happened. You see, we can't find any blood trace."

"All I know is that he suddenly began to convulse and scream in pain then dropped to the floor dead. There was a lot of light and a terrible smell and Jonah was... ecstatic."

"Did you scream?" he asked. There was something too casual about how he asked it.

Leading question, Gaganan warned, watching his body language.

"Bloody murder," she gambled. "Is there anything else, Inspector? I would like to get to the hospital today."

"Oh, no. Unless you remembered anything from the lake since we talked last."

She shook her head. "Will I be able to go home soon? I would very much like to."

"Hopefully. We are a bit concerned for your safety at the moment. He may deem you too much a threat to leave alive, especially if he was as obsessed with you

as evidence is beginning to show. Are you..." he hesitated.

Nea read his expression as he search for the word, supplied it for him. "Afraid for my life?"

He nodded.

She grabbed the small test cake Anang set in front of her, breaking it up into four pieces and blowing it cool. "I am more afraid for Thomas right now, quite frankly. Those two had a rivalry, I believe."

The man nodded, drinking his coffee. He frowned as the huge cat jumped into a chair at the table. Nea dropped the cooled fry-bread onto a saucer and dribbled honey over it, sliding it in front of the cat. The inspector chose not to say anything about the odd behaviour. Some of the Aboriginals viewed animals differently and anything he might say could offend her. He chose to voice his own frustration instead. "I just do not understand it. We were so certain he could not have been there. His alibi..."

She shrugged. "I told you he was clever. He probably got one of his friends to take the test for him. Was his professor a woman?"

He nodded.

"Then it is possible that he charmed her to lie for him. I would not blame her though, the man... has ways of convincing you what he's saying is absolutely true. A type of hypnosis maybe. If you catch him, treat him with extreme caution, and never put a woman in with him. And always have a third party watching behind glass. He's not safe. I don't know if it's pheromones or what but... he's crafty."

"Sounds like an episode of X-files," he commented dryly. He had a look on his face that told her he was listening to be polite, but probably would disregard her advice.

"I am not sure what you mean, but truth is often stranger than fiction," she pressed. It was tricky putting a believable spin on the matter without revealing the truth. "He believes he is a powerful sorcerer, evidenced by the ritual objects you found, the rituals I was subjected to. Therefore he is likely to be able to accomplish certain things through sheer force of will alone. And through experience I can tell you, he has a very strong will. He had me walking like a docile lamb to the slaughter, though all I wanted to do was fight." She picked up a slice of the bread. "Oh, and never, never look him directly in the eyes, he might have used some form of hypnosis. Treat him like a deadly snake and you should be fine."

"If we can catch him," he grumbled.

"Maybe he had a good hiding place," Anang suggested, setting the rest of the

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fry-bread on the table. “A secret place you have not yet found?”

“Maybe.”

“Breakfast, Inspector?” she offered.

He suddenly seemed to remember this wasn't a social call. “Oh, no thank you. I should be going anyway. I have to re-interview Mr. Harlan. They didn't permit a full enquiry last night, and understandably so.” He drained his cup, and stood.

Something worried Nea. “Inspector... will there be any charges against Thomas for ...how he rescued me?”

“Unlikely,” he assured her. “The only people who can press those charges are unaccounted for. You see, Mr. Jacobi was not the owner of the house. There is currently no one to press charges on the trespass.” He bowed to Anang. “Thank you very much for your hospitality, Mrs. Redbird, Miss Majiwe.”

“You're welcome.”

He turned to leave, paused, then sheepishly reached for a slice of the bread. “On second thought, it is a bit 'til lunch,” he grinned.

“Take as much as you like. I have plenty,” she smiled.

“Oh, no thanks. One will do.”

Anang saw him out. Once he was gone she leaned back against the door breathing a sigh of relief. Nea munched thoughtfully on her breakfast, worried sick about what was going to happen to Thomas.



When she finally got to the hospital she found the inspector at Thomas's bedside.

“Are you sure you heard her scream?” the inspector was asking. Something in his voice said he didn't believe it.

Joseph stood at the window staring out at the blossoms on the tree outside.

Thomas's eyes flicked to Nea as she entered the room, saw the brief downcast of her eyes that served for a nod. “It could very well have been some kind of night bird. But last night I would have sworn it was a woman's scream. I headed in that direction, then saw Jonah carrying the body like I told you.”

The inspector frowned over his note pad. “Did it occur to you that it might be her in the blanket?”

Thomas's cheeks went darker for a moment. “Yes,” he growled, reaching out to take Nea's hand as she drifted closer to the bed, kissed her fingers. “I almost

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jumped him too, but something didn't seem right. A little voice in my ear said it wasn't her, couldn't be. Taking a second look, it was too big, then I saw strands of white hair and blackened scalp... I knew it couldn't be. The body looked burned, what I could see of it. And he would not have had time to burn her body that completely and still be able to handle it in the short amount of time since she screamed."

"How long was that, exactly?" The pencil poised over the pad.

Thomas shrugged with his good shoulder. "I don't know. Five, ten minutes. Felt more like an hour. I was in a panic, scrambling to reach her. Time is relative. Seconds feel like hours when that's all you have," he said, staring deep into Nea's eyes.

The inspector scribbled. "It does tend to do that," he admitted. "So, you entered the house because you thought you heard her inside?"

He nodded. "It was the only house in the area of the scream. The back door was not closed, not all the way."

The man nodded, making notes. "What possessed you to go up there looking?" he asked without looking up, hoping to sideswipe him.

Thomas was ready for it though. "You told me that he had left the country. So when a friend told me they'd seen him on that mountainside... I had to question it. My roommate had pictures of him on a certain road out there, from some photo project he did for class. Quite the lucky accident. I knew he went off every weekend. I put two and two together and figured if he wasn't where you said he was that was where he'd be."

"Why didn't you just call me and give me the information?" the inspector sighed.

"Would you really have been able to do something? If they had seen a police car in the drive, or even suspected you were the Mounties, Jonah would have vanished into the basement and either not answered the door, or that man Nea said was there would have. They would have denied the claim and you would not have been able to do anything further. I thought I could verify with my own eyes that he was there, maybe catch a glimpse of Nea, then call you. But..."

"But?" he echoed, knowing what was coming.

"But I heard a scream. I didn't have the means or the time to call you."

"Someone did."

"Someone with a landline probably heard the shotgun," he countered.

The inspector sighed, rose from his chair. "Convenient story, Mr. Harlan. But altogether believable. And unless we find evidence to the contrary you're off the

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hook.” He tipped a non-existent hat to Nea. “Miss Majiwe, you are very lucky. You have a brave, though reckless young man there.”

She hugged his arm to her, neither one of them had released each others hand since she arrived. “I know, sir. But don’t worry, I’ll be grounding him. Should be no more need of heroics if you can catch the serpent running loose.”

The inspector cleared his throat, the truth was uncomfortable. “Yes, well. We’re going to keep a man on the door until he’s discharged, then maintain the surveillance on you as long as we can.”

“Thank you,” she said flatly. “Good day, Inspector,” she added, turning from him to Thomas, brushing a lock of his hair out of his eyes with her free hand.

When the door closed behind him, Joseph turned from the window. He waited a moment until he was certain the Inspector had gone before speaking. “*A little voice in your ear?*” he chuckled. “*Nice touch.*”

Thomas laughed, instantly regretting it. “*It was the truth.*”

Nea was still concerned. “*How did he do?*” she asked Joseph, worried about the interrogation.

“*Did a right fair little tap dance,*” he grinned. “*Would make old Elk Whistle proud of you.*” He crossed to the bed and shook Thomas’s hand. “*You take care of yourself. I’ll see you when they bring you home. Nea, you brought the truck?*”

She nodded, handed him his keys. “*Go home, get some sleep.*”

“*Eventually,*” he grinned. “*See you tonight, Nea.*” He gave her shoulder a gentle pat then left the two lovebirds alone.

Nea remained with Thomas until visiting hours were over. Henry had driven over with Julia and Hecuba. They had dinner together, then Henry gave Hecuba the keys to his van and told her to come get him first thing in the morning. Nea noticed the exchange, but did not say anything.

As they climbed into the van, Hecuba told Nea they had to stop at the airport before going to the Redbirds’. Julia had a plane to Rome that night. Julia apologized repeatedly, all the way to the apartment to pick up her things. “I just have t’ get back. My mom is goin’ out o’ her mind with all this. You sure you’re ok with my leavin’? ‘Cause just say th’ word and I’ll find a way....”

Nea laughed. “Julia, take a breath. It’s fine. I’m safe. I’m glad you stayed, but you do have to get home. I understand. I’ll be going myself as soon as I can.”

She perked up a bit at that. “I’ll see you in the fall then? Unless you want me to come up to t’ Mountain fer any reason?” she said hopefully.

“If I do, I’ll let you know. I have your number. If we decide to ...escalate

matters, you'll be the first I call, ok?" she smiled.

They started to pull into the parking lot of the apartment complex when Julia had a thought. "Won't it be risky bringing Nea to the airport?" she asked. "If Jonah's lurking there... Thomas ain't here to cancel him."

Hecuba glanced back at her in the mirror. "Don't you worry. I'm going to stick with her. Besides, I'll need her to keep watch for me while I focus on you, make sure nothing waylays you between where we leave you at the gate and take off."

"Yeah well, you see you watch your back," she added. "You're not immune you know."

Hecuba held up her right hand, wiggled bare fingers. Nea noticed that she wore an obsidian bangle on the wrist. "I'm prepared for his scrawny wanted ass."

"Nothing obvious," Julia warned, worried.

Hecuba laughed. "Oh, I know. This'll protect me, reflect whatever he intended for me back on him and then I scream bloody murder."

"That's the ticket," Julia giggled as they pulled into a parking space. "Gimme the keys and I'll run up and get Lulabelle."

"You need any help?" Nea asked.

Julia shook her head. "Nah, everything else is already in the back of the van."

"Oh, and clean up any mess she made in the bathroom," Hecuba added as Julia reached for the door. "I'm not cleaning up after that rat."

"All right, all right," Julia groaned, rolling her eyes. "As bad as mom," she muttered.

As she darted up the staircase to the apartment door, Hecuba turned in her seat. "Think Anang and Joseph would mind one more for the night?"

"Don't see why not."

"Well, I know they don't have a whole lot of room, and you're already sleeping there..."

"Honey, how much room does a cat need?" Nea laughed. "You can have the couch, I'll find a pillow somewhere with Gaganan."

"Good," she sighed. "I didn't want to stay at the apartment by myself tonight."

Nea grinned. "So, what's the deal with you and Henry?" she asked.

Hecuba immediately blushed. "What's to tell?" she evaded.

Nea chuckled, "That," she said, indicating Hecuba's cheek. Hecuba immediately checked herself out in the rear-view, growled at herself.

"Not much really... yet. Give it some time maybe.... Ok, ok, we went at it in the dark room last Sunday," she confessed.

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Nea couldn't stop grinning.

"I think part of it was stress relief; worried about you, Thomas, the whole fiasco. One minute we were shoulder to shoulder over the stop bath and the next..."

"Congrats."

"Not yet," she growled. "It was good, but that could have been the circumstances. We'll have to see. Just... don't tell Julia. I'd never live it down."

"She's going to figure it out eventually."

Hecuba chuckled. "I don't think so. I had to practically tell her what you two had been up to that night by the lake before it clicked. She's too naive. Here she comes. Not a word."

Their trip to the airport was uneventful, save for a tearful farewell at the gate. Hecuba and Nea kept giving her advice to keep her safe between the gate and the air until Julia was ready to strangle them both. "You two are like a pair of old biddies," she growled, but she was smiling. They waited until she was past security before they found a quiet place to watch the plane take off that was in plain sight of someone who could call security immediately should anything untoward happen. Nothing did. Hecuba watched with her inner eye until the plane was off the ground, oblivious to the real world around her. To the casual observer, she was just staring off into space.

They got back to Anang's just in time for supper.



The police had finally left the house. There was police tape everywhere, and a good bit of his supplies were admitted into evidence. But between the storeroom and the tower, there was just enough to do what he wanted.

The tower had been a revelation in and of itself. It was a filthy, barren little hovel in an otherwise magnificent country cottage. There had been only a hard, narrow bed, some books in Russian and some spell supplies. He had watched some of the things the police took out: Letters and mementos which had signatures such as "Nicky", "Annushka", and "Alix". It was the things the man had hidden away that were the real treasures, things that had one of the criminal investigators nearly wetting himself with excitement.

He had had a full day of hiding to stew and fume over the turn of things. He would find a way to punish her somehow. It had come to him as evening settled in

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and an owl flew past the tower window. She was an animal lover, studying to be a vet, or so Coleman had gleaned from her records at the registrar. From what he himself had witnessed at the lake, she could not only take animal form, but converse with them as well. Or that was what it had seemed she was doing when he had revealed himself.

Thankfully, they had not taken the book on curses, as they had not known what it was. He began to gather what he would need: dusty old black candles, a brass bell, a few herbs the police had overlooked in the tower, a strand of her hair he had carefully saved in a book for later use.

He cautiously went down to the basement where he activated the font. Everything hinged on his finding her without Harlan. If she was at the hospital with him... but she wasn't. At first he wasn't even sure it was her he had found. The water only showed two cats curled up on a pillow. One of them he recognized as that monstrosity that followed Rosamund around campus. The other had to be her.

He set up his ritual space, surrounded himself with the black candles and wrote out his curse on parchment with special ink, chanting it over and over, rolled it up and tied it with the strand of her hair, then lit it from the candles. He dropped it into the brazier and watched it burn.



The next morning, Hecuba rolled over on the couch, stared over at the pillow Nea had tossed under the coffee table. Gaganan lay curled around, not the grey cat Nea had gone to sleep as, but a large squirrel. The squirrel was buried in his chest fur, head pillowed on his arm, with the cat's other paw draped protectively over her small body. She actually chuckled when Nea stirred, sat up and stretched, leaned back against Gaganan's enormous belly as he twisted onto his back. "Cute," she grinned. "But, um... why a squirrel?"

Nea looked down at her paws, felt Gaganan twist his head around in question. The phone rang, Hecuba picked it up, not sure if the others were up yet. "Redbird residence."

"Hec?" came the voice.

"Oh, morning, fuzzy," she said, almost cheerfully, giggling as she watched Gaganan pin Nea down and begin giving her a tongue bath.

"Did you forget something?" he asked.

"Huh? OH! Sorry, I'll be there in ten!" She hung up the phone without

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preamble, snatched up the keys and darted out the door.

The animals paused their tussle to watch in surprise. Anang appeared at the head of the hall, wrapping her dressing gown around her. “Who was that?” She heard the van start up, noticed the abandoned couch and nodded. “Ah.” She looked down at the two animals, grinned. “I’m going to go get dressed. When he’s done with you, do you want to help me with breakfast?”

Nea barked something from under his paws which she took as yes. Anang disappeared again.

Gaganan began licking her belly, which was surprisingly ticklish. Nea balked, tried to squirm free, tried to shift forms to escape. Nothing happened. Gaganan chuckled, the vibration of his loud purring adding to the tickle. Suddenly Nea went still, stared up at him with wide eyes. *Stop,* she said.

He looked down at her, tongue still sticking out, cocked his head. *What?*

I... I can’t change.

Can’t cheat, you mean, he chuckled.

She reached up and grabbed his tongue. *No, I mean it. I *can’t change!**

He shook his head, pulling himself free and got off her. He sat back, concerned. *Try it now.*

Maybe it was the duress?

 she asked hopefully.

Maybe.

She made another attempt to become human. Nothing happened. *I can’t have forgotten how!*

His eyes narrowed. *Did you become a squirrel on purpose?*

Gaganan, I was a cat when I went to sleep. I woke up a squirrel.

I like squirrels, he grinned.

Yeah, I know, almost as much as you like frogs. But that’s not the point.

He sighed. *You’re right. Did you dream of squirrels? Did Squirrel visit you?*

She shook her head. *Not that I remember. I dreamed more of black candles and shotguns.*

This is not good. He crossed the room to the shelf where the scrabble pieces had been put in a thin wooden bowl. He carefully grabbed its edge in his teeth and carried it over to the coffee table. Nea hopped up onto the table, looking at him quizzically.

What are those for?

Communication. You’re going to need them. Hey, see if you can shift into another animal, he added, thinking. *Maybe a parrot or something. Or a monkey

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who can write. I'll be back.* He jumped off the table and headed for the back door.

Where are you going?

To ask a friend what's going on.

She watched as Gaganan stretched onto hind paws and flipped the latch lock on the door, and struggled to turn the knob with his paws. It took him a bit, but he managed it, though he left it slightly open behind him.

She concentrated on shifting.

Anang breezed past, glanced at her. "Not going to help with breakfast?" she commented.

At that moment, after a bit of struggle, Nea managed to become a parrot. Her loud squawk caught Anang's attention and made her turn.

"Can't shift!" she croaked.

Anang came back. "What?"

"Can't change. Can't be human. Hard to be bird."

Worry crossed her face. "Try... try to be something else."

"What?"

She thought a second, "What was the first form you learned?"

"Cat." And Nea began to twist her body, struggling to become a cat again. She was out of breath when she managed it.

"Now try human."

Nea did. But try as she might, the form would not come. She shook her furry head.

Anang went back into the back of the house to get Joseph. Nea returned to parrot form, to make communication easier. She wracked her brain trying to figure out how this could have come about, what she could have done to displease the spirits so much that they would take away her gift, or if Jonah's ritual had taken something from her after all.

The door left open was too great a temptation for the stray who had been wandering the yard all morning. There were enticing smells from inside, bacon grease for example. He slipped in, cautious all the while, his nose pointed for the kitchen garbage can. A noise from the next room caught his attention, a squawk. Chicken was better. But it might just be one of those twittery little things in cages. He decided to investigate. As he peeked into the living room, he laid eyes on one of those human chatterers, those bright, arrogant birds with the painful beaks, standing on a low table. However, the moment it raised its head and they met eye to eye it became a bunny rabbit. A sudden puff of feathers and there sat the plumpest little brown rabbit he had seen in many years. With a bound of joy at his luck, he charged

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for it.

Nea saw the dog just seconds before she shifted forms again, this time far more swiftly than she had on her own. She did not even have time to register what she was, only that she was four pawed and not winged, before the animal charged. She gave a shriek and instinctively leapt from the table and dove under the couch. The beast shoved his nose underneath, pawing and snapping to reach her. *Oh, breakfast, blessed breakfast!* he barked. *Fat, juicy rabbit!*

Leave me alone! she yelled.

The dog paused, flicked an ear her way. *Did you just... Did I...?*

You can still understand me?

Uh... yeah. Weird, huh? Talking breakfast, he mumbled. *Almost as weird as a bird becoming a rabbit, but who am I to complain. Better breakfast.*

I am the Speaker, she squeaked, her little heart racing in terror. *If you don't eat me I can help you. Find you a home.*

He did not seem very interested in the word home. He snuffled.

Real food? Without fur?

He laid down, thinking. *I came in cause I smelled bacon.*

Bacon is available.

Suddenly, the dog yelped and disappeared with a roar from Joseph. Nea darted out from under the couch, squeaking for them to wait, but Nea discovered rabbits have little voice save for screaming. Joseph, in just a pair of jeans, had the dog by the scruff in one hand and his other arm around his middle and was about to throw him out.

She flipped the bowl of scrabble tiles over, the sound causing him to look at her. She began searching for letters frantically. "Feed. Do n..." She searched frantically for a 'w' but it must have been one of the face down tiles. Bunny paws were made for digging not manipulation. She settled for sitting up on her hind paws and gesturing with her front for him to be put down.

Joseph frowned, but did so, though he did not let go of the animal's scruff.

If he lets you go, you won't try to eat me again?

I'll get food? You can get me food?

Yes.

Then no. I'll be good.

Nea tried to gesture again, found it hard to manage and began sorting through tiles again.

"Nea, why don't you just change and talk to me?" Joseph asked.

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Anang growled. “She can’t. That’s what I was trying to tell you. She’s ...broken somehow.”

“Can I let the dog go?” he asked.

Nea looked up, nodded vigorously.

He sighed, looked down at the animal. “You make one wrong move, mutt. You go for any animal in this house and you will be very sorry.” Then he let the dog go.

He just sat there, looking around expectantly, when the back door swung open again and a burst of air preceded a scattering of the tiles.

The dog cowered instantly. Nea skittered back herself, startled to see a barely there, but bright eagle form. *Gaganan, is that a spirit? she gasped.

The bird made some unintelligible noise at which Gaganan padded forward and translated. *Yes. He says you can see him because you are in animal form. Animals and dreamers both can see spirits. He asks what is with the hound.* He put his paws on the coffee table, then blinked. Nea changed back into a squirrel. *That is starting to annoy me,* he growled.

She barked back, *Annoy you?*

He sighed as the bird spoke again. *The mutt?*

Oh, he came in through the door you left open looking for food. I became a rabbit and he thought I was breakfast. But I talked him down. All he wants is to be fed. If Anang will do that then he’ll happily go his own way.

The bird turned his head, levelled an eye on Anang and spoke. *Feed him. The Speaker has made a bargain.* She nodded, tapped her husband’s bare arm. “Take him into the kitchen and find him something to eat. He won’t be a problem.” She turned back to Nea. “But this *is* a problem. We ...” She was interrupted by the phone. She growled, started to ignore it but the eagle gestured to the noise with his beak. *It wishes to speak with you. You should hear what it has to say.*

She frowned, but nodded. “Excuse me then.” She picked up the phone. “Boozhoo?”

“Anang?” came Mary’s voice. “I know it’s early but... does this mean anything to you? ‘When face to face with a beast you lay, Become you shall its favoured prey. Your love of beast your bitterest pill, If I cannot have you no one will? Human no more.’”

“Not re... wait... where did that come from?”

There was a sigh of relief from the other end. “Oh, good, you *do* know. Father’s been hearing that over and over in his sleep. He had a bad night to say the least. Swore I had to call you the minute he woke up. What does it mean?”

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“I’m...not a hundred percent certain, but as soon as I know, you’ll know. Did he have a vision with this, or just hear it?”

There was a momentary, muffled conference on the other end. “No vision really. Just a dark room, a black candle and the chanting, a figure he could not see. It was in English, if that means anything.”

“It does,” she growled. “It does. I’ll call you later.”

She hung up and came back to where the eagle was scrutinizing the squirrel, now nestled back between Gaganan’s front legs, leaning on his chest.

What did it say, Child of the Stars? the eagle asked her.

“Old Crazy Smokes had a vision last night. Kept hearing this in his sleep.” She repeated the rhyme.

Nea gave a cry of anguish and buried herself face first in white chest fur. Gaganan dropped his head over her back, purring to comfort her.

A black magician has cursed her, said the eagle. *I told you those who laid eyes upon the dark man are changed somehow.*

Is there no way to break the curse? Gaganan asked.

If there is... only one will know it.

“Spider,” said Anang. “She remembers everything.”

Make the thing talk again, he said, nodding to the phone. *Inform her. For now, do not leave her alone.* With that he launched himself straight up through the roof and out of the house.

Whwhwhat did he say? Nea sobbed.

Gaganan rubbed his head against her back. *To ask Spider.*

Anang was already on the phone, dialling the Education centre.



When Hecuba returned, she hung back with Henry, let Thomas go in first. She leaned over and whispered to Henry with a smile, “I just hope she doesn’t pull his stitches greeting him,” she chuckled.

“That would hurt.”

Thomas crossed the threshold. “Home, I’m Honey!” he exclaimed cheerfully. He found everyone in the kitchen wearing very long faces. Joseph had yet to put a shirt on, and Anang was sitting at the table staring at the phone with no breakfast in sight. Gaganan was in a chair, resting his chin glumly on the table staring at a dejected looking squirrel sitting in the middle of the table in front of the scattered

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scrabble tiles. The board was no where in sight. A warning woof from a strange dog that looked to be part beagle part ...something... drew his attention under the table.

The squirrel looked up, sprang suddenly off the table and leaped for him in two bounds. He instinctively put up his good arm to soften the expected impact of squirrel becoming girl. He remembered the elk cow at the lake all too well. To his surprise, the squirrel landed on the upraised arm and raced up it to his neck, burying her head under his jaw and making sounds that might have been sobs.

“What’s... going on?”

The dog didn’t seem to know what was happening either, but the squirrel turned rabbit turned squirrel who got him fed seemed to be ok with the new human, so he laid down and went back to polishing the plate.

Outside, Hecuba frowned. She had expected some kind of noise. An exclamation, squeals of delight, murmurs of voices asking concerned questions. But there was nothing. “Something’s not right,” she mumbled, grabbed Henry’s hand and pulled him inside after her.

Anang got them all around the table and explained. She handed Hecuba a piece of paper on which she had written the rhyme Mary had told her. She read it over about four times while Thomas held and comforted Nea as best he could.

“What do you think?” Anang asked finally. “Eagle said it was a curse.”

“It is,” she agreed. “He used a black candle... The wording... there aren’t any real gaps or loopholes, but... there might be.”

“Let’s start with what it means?” Thomas asked.

“It means,” Hecuba explained, “that whenever she is face to face with an animal, she becomes its favourite prey.”

Gaganan’s head popped up, shook so hard his ears flapped. He put his paws on the table and began pulling tiles towards him. ‘Frogs’, he spelled.

Nea nodded vigorously.

“Your favourite prey is frogs?”

Mine are rabbits, said the dog, but did not come out from under the table. Nea had banished him there when she got tired of bouncing from one rodent form to another.

“But she can’t turn into reptiles,” Thomas said. He frowned. “Maybe she is limited by her own limits?”

“What?” Henry asked, confused.

“If the animal’s favourite prey is a reptile, something she can’t change into, then

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she becomes the next favourite that she can,” Joseph explained, beginning to understand.

“There has to be a way to break this. There always is,” Thomas insisted. “We just have to find it in the wording. Or maybe it’s in her own limits.”

Henry shook his head. “You’ve been reading too many fairy tales.”

“Hey, every fairy tale had some seed of truth in them, or some lesson to be learned,” he defended.

Hecuba held up her hand before Henry could retaliate. “He’s right, there has to be something. I know it’s there, I just can’t... see it yet. Keep talking.”

“What if she comes face to face with a non-predator?” Henry asked. Hecuba looked at him, surprised.

“Interesting. Has it been tried?”

The consensus was no.

“Ok, so we find ourselves a rabbit or a mouse,” Thomas suggested.

On it! cried Gaganan and hopped off the chair and headed for the door.

Hecuba guessed what he was up to and went to open the door for him. “We’ll need it alive mind you.”

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I figured that. Not a kitten you know, he grumbled, flicking his tail at her as he trotted out.

“Has she tried changing into human when there are no animals around?” Hecuba asked as she closed the door.

Nea nodded her head, choked back a sob. This was what Jonah had intended to hurt her with the most, she was sure of it. She would never be able to be near animals again, not unless she wanted to risk being eaten. It would take her away from Gaganan... well he had meant it to, but it wouldn’t. If she could have been human without animals around it might have worked... most of the time.

Hecuba sighed, headed for the sink to put a kettle on. She thought better with tea.

No one said anything for a long time. Hecuba made the tea, served it and sat sipping hers while she ran the words of the curse over and over in her mind. She ran over the letter Jonah had written to Nea as well, hoping some clue might lie there, but nothing connected.

The silence was finally broken by a whine from the floor.

Speaker-bunny, he whimpered.

What?

I gotta... go out.

Go out?

*Well, I could do it right here, but in my experience humans get real mad about

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that. Madder than when you knock over the cans looking for leftovers.*

Oh! She began fishing for tiles immediately. ‘Dog out’.

Henry got up this time, held the door open for him. The hound paused on the threshold, looked back at the table. Nea sighed. She was a rabbit again. *Can I come back... maybe?* he pleaded.

I’ll ask... Just... just hang around. Who knows? she said with a shrug of her head. *Just don’t dig up the yard. Anang’ll fricassee you.*

What’s that?

You’d rather not know.

The dog shrugged and shuffled out the door. The moment the door closed on him, Nea forced herself to become a parrot.

“Ah, to talk again,” she sighed. “Wonder what’s taking them so long to call back?”

Anang refilled her teacup. “She lives way out in the woods, hon. And she’s not that fast anymore.”

“True.”

Just as Henry was about to sit down he heard a noise at the back door again. He sighed, headed back to open it. Gaganan trotted in with a small mouse clamped firmly in his teeth. Nea hopped to the edge of the table, looked over. “Is it still ali... awk!” she shrieked and became a squirrel again. *This is getting old.*

Gaganan leapt from the floor to Henry’s empty chair to the tabletop. He set the mouse down near Nea and backed up, crouched down to keep an eye on it.

Hecuba reached out to touch the mouse. “I did say we needed it alive for this to work,” she sighed.

He rolled his eyes and folded his paws. *She just fainted.*

Nea crept over to the mouse, gently began stroking her cheek. *Wake up, little one. It’s safe now.*

Ssssafef? she stirred. She opened her eyes, blinked up at the squirrel. *The cat...* then the human faces behind the squirrel’s head came into focus. She jumped to her feet, prepared to run.

Nea grabbed her with both paws. *No. Safe. Cat not eat you. Cat brought you to me.*

The nose twitched. *Why?*

 Her eyes went wide and she slowly looked over her shoulder at the cat calmly regarding her. *EEEEK!* She turned back, closing her eyes and bracing herself.

Nea sighed. *Gaganan, would you be so kind as to leave the room? This might

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not work if you're around.*

Not to mention she might faint again? he chuckled, but got up and leapt from the table. *I have to water the grass anyway,* he sniffed, sauntering off down the hall to the bathroom.

Nea turned back to the mouse who watched the cat go in shock. *He... he obeyed you!*

Yes. I am the Speaker. He is my friend. Tell me. What do you like to eat most of all?

The mouse blinked up at her. *Like to eat? Well,* she sat back on her haunches, rubbing her little paws together nervously, glancing up at the humans. *Um, what about them? Can you make them go away too?*

Not right now, but they are my friends too. No harm. I promise.

All right... well, I like blackberries, and grass seed... but I suppose... most of all... I do love me a fat juicy caterpillar in the Spring. I don't care for the fuzzy ones, though, they tickle. But the hairless green kind... oh... they are nice.

Nea looked down at herself in disappointment. Thomas sighed behind her. "Nope, kitten," he whispered. "You're still a squirrel."

She reached for the tiles, began spelling out something. The mouse looked the tiles over with interest. *Ooo, those taste good?* she asked.

No, they help me speak with the humans. It suddenly occurred to her to try to change back into a parrot. It took about half a minute, but she managed it. The mouse had backed to the middle of the table, hidden between the salt cellar and the sugar bowl. *It's all right,* she explained. *I'm... having issues.*

She turned to her friends. "Can she have a berry or a nut or something for her fright?"

Anang got up, almost numbly, and took three peanuts from a can in the cabinet. She set them down near the mouse.

For me? she squeaked. When Nea nodded, she gathered them up happily, stuffing them into her cheeks.

"Take her out?" Nea asked.

Anang held out her hand, palm up. "I don't want her coming back into the house though," she warned. "Tell her that. I won't have her chewing on everything."

Nea relayed the information. The mouse nodded. *Oh, no worries. Going far away. Too many people here, too many cats. And a dog...*

There's a lake near, Nea pointed. *That way. This side of the sun path.*

Ooo, like woods. Thank you. Um... how do I get down? she asked, looking

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worried. She was surrounded on all sides.

Get on her hand. She'll be gentle.

Even though Nea told her it was all right, the mouse was hesitant and nervous, but she did as she was asked. She grabbed hold of the fingers to steady herself as she was moved. Scared half to death she closed her eyes and waited until she felt fresh air again. Anang returned to the table just as the phone rang. Both she and Joseph leaped for it. Nea just leaped, having not expected the sudden sound nor the volume to seem so much louder at this size. Joseph managed to answer it and hit the speaker button.

“Boozhoo,” said Anang. “Joe has you on speaker. What did she say?”

The voice on the other end belonged to Seven Trees. “She’d tell you herself but you know her and phones. She’s here.”

“Tell her we’ve run some experiments,” squawked Nea.

“Who is that?”

“Nea. I’m a parrot. Only way to talk.”

“Oh,” she answered. “Well, tell me about them, and I’ll relay.”

They explained the animal experiments they had run, when she changed, when she couldn’t control it, and when she could. There was a moment as Seven Trees relayed the information to Spider in Ojibwe, and another where her voice could be heard in the background.

Seven Trees replied. “It’s not going to be easy. She has no memory of white curses, nor anything of this kind. If there’s a way to break it, it will lie in the letter of the curse, in what it says and more importantly, does not say. If she cannot change into something she cannot be... that’s something. ‘What’ will take a bit more figuring.”

Thomas had a question. “Ok, I know how he was able to curse her, cause I wasn’t near her to negate it, but... when he had her, he had something on her that was magical, that he could use to manipulate her. The moment I got near her that broke. Why is the curse affecting her while I’m near her?”

After a moment Seven Trees gave him Spider’s answer. “For the same reason she can change and remain an animal in your presence. You ...you can’t turn off personal, internal magic, just stop it from affecting anyone else within your area. At least that’s what she thinks. She says she was like you about a thousand years ago.”

Henry snorted. Hecuba put a hand on his arm and whispered. “Ancestral memory.”

He mouthed an enlightened, ‘Oh,’ then frowned, not certain if he bought it.

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“She says her wife could use her magic on herself all day, even sitting next to her, just nothing that would affect another person. This curse apparently affects how her magic works.”

“And curses are different than spells,” said Hecuba. “They can only be stopped in the casting. After that... you have to break them. If it effected the people around her, you might be able to negate that, but this... at best you might be able to keep her from turning into prey, but not allow her to return to human. Though we have seen that is not true.” Something occurred to her, fluttered to the fore of her brain on silent little owl’s wings. “What if... what if she was faced with a creature who’s favoured prey was human?”

There was silence. Even Anang’s head came up.

A flush came from the hallway and Gaganan called from the corner. *Can I come back now?*

Why not? Nea shrugged. *I’m not doing much talking anyway.* She went ahead and turned back into a squirrel, to avoid the popping change. It was beginning to make her joints ache. It was worse than having the hiccups.

“That would be highly dangerous,” said Thomas, making room on his lap for the cat. “How will we keep it from eating her when she changes? So far she’s been able to avoid getting eaten by promising them food instead. We can’t very well give the animal another person.”

“How about Jonah?” Henry suggested.

Thomas glared, but did not comment. “And from what I understand about eating humans... once you’ve tasted the ‘long pig’, everything else pales by comparison. They’re not going to be willing to settle for less.”

“Most of the creatures that eat humans that are still in existence aren’t technically animals,” translated Seven Trees.

Anang had been silent a long while. “*He* would know, wouldn’t he?”

“He?” Seven Trees asked. “You don’t mean the Guardian?”

“Yes, the guardian. He was banished to Galunlati, where the dangerous things live. He might know others among the dangerous things. He’s marked her, the least He could do is protect her. He might be able to make the bargain, force them to settle or keep them from eating her.”

There was a long bantering on the other side of the phone, other voices besides the two women. Finally, Seven Trees handed the phone off to someone else, Falling Elk. “We are not all in agreement with this, mind,” he said. “*But...* the consensus is that you should speak to Him in any case. If anyone will know how to

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break it, or have the strength to, it will be Him. We agree that the risk may be as great as facing a man-eater, however. You must understand that to face Him now... is to put yourself and those you care about at great risk.”

Cold Heart’s voice carried through the line. “You know what you risk, girl? If you face that destiny? The end to your vet dreams. The end to your white lover. Your friends.”

“Only if she runs,” Thomas answered flatly. “Only if she comes upon it sleeping and runs. And she won’t go alone. I’ll carry her there.”

Cold Heart’s voice came in clearer. It seemed she had snatched the phone. “Do you know what you risk, boy?”

“You know what I am,” he said, with more calm than he felt. “He can’t kill what she loves if it comes with her. We die together or we live together. It’s too much a risk for her to make the journey alone. She might not make it. Besides,” he shrugged, stroking Nea’s back with the fingers of his good hand, “I really don’t think it’s her destiny to be Uktena’s dinner.”

“*You are wise, Medicine Shield,*” said Spider in the background. He could tell she was nowhere near the phone, though she had raised her voice. “*Are you sure this is what you desire? Neither of you may ever return.*”

“*A risk we’ll take, grandmother. We have no choice.*”

“*Fine then. Bring her home. ...Have your mother brought too. We will care for her in event of the worst. Besides,*” she added with a chuckle, “*Old Pipestone seems to have hope for you.*”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX:

Tap-Dancing

As Henry drove Thomas down the road, they noticed an old, faded gold coupe parked on the side of the road a couple houses down from Joseph's. His house was an island lot, and bigger than most lots in the area, even though the house was smaller. The gold car was within easy sight of both front and back doors. "I hope that's a cop," Thomas groaned.

Henry watched him out of his side mirror. "He's looking back at us and talking on a CB. I think it might be."

"Is he following?"

"Doesn't look like it."

Thomas leaned his head on the window. "I'm not entirely sure if I should be happy or uneasy about that."

Henry shrugged. "Well, if it is a cop then we want it where it is. If it's not..." he gave an grim chuckle, "I pity what those two women will do to him before Joseph can fetch and level a weapon on him."

Thomas couldn't help but laugh, adjusted his sling. His shoulder was aching.

Henry glanced over at him, saw the grimace. "You going to be able to make the drive to Manitoba?"

"No," he grumbled. "Hecuba's going to have to drive."

"It won't be so bad," he said, trying to cheer his friend up while keeping an eye not just on traffic, but for anything suspicious behind them. "I'm sure her people will be able to find a way around this. If nothing else, we'll lure him there and force

him to undo it.”

“It doesn’t work that way. But I’m sure if anyone can help, it will be the Uktena.”

“Then why do you sound so dejected about it? So worried?”

Thomas had to think about that one. “Honestly?”

“I’d prefer honestly, but if it’ll help you to lie to me, go ahead,” Henry grinned.

Thomas tried to smile, but worry was too great. “I’m afraid he’ll keep her. Take her away from me. But... then again, I don’t believe we’d have been brought together, to have come this far only to be forced apart. There has to be some purpose to all this.”

“Some rhyme to the reason?”

“Exactly.”

Henry turned into the RCMP station parking lot. “Something Redbird told me the other night: The Spirit moves.”

Thomas gave a dry laugh. “Nothing to do but enjoy the dance,” he finished, nodding as he unbuckled his seat belt. “Yeah, I got that speech before too. And damn it all to hell if he isn’t right.”

The inside of the station was clean but crowded, mostly with furniture. There were no civilians except a single receptionist who nodded when they asked for Inspector Leverel and pressed a button on her phone. “George, someone to see you.”

The inspector came out of a small glass office complaining. “Helen, I’ve told you, when there’s civilians around to ... Oh, it’s you,” he frowned on sighting Thomas. He sighed, lifted part of the counter and beckoned them through. “You put my man in quite a dilemma this morning.”

“Sorry,” Thomas muttered.

“That him in the gold coupe?” Henry asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. We were hoping he was yours. What was the dilemma?” Henry grinned, even though he had a fair idea what the problem had been.

“The dilemma was that I set him to watch two people and only one left the house. I had hoped you two would stick together for a while,” the Inspector frowned. “How is she doing, by the way?”

“Well,” Thomas began, shrugged with his good shoulder. “I needed to talk to you and wanted to be sure that we wouldn’t be overheard. She’s... honestly, she’s not doing well. She’s been through a lot and I need to take her home.”

The inspector opened the door to his office and led them in. “And home is?”

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“Manitoba,” Thomas answered, sitting down.

“That’s a long ways. Can’t she get help here? Where we can keep an eye on things? He’s still on the loose. I wouldn’t do anything risky for a few weeks to a month if I were you.”

Thomas shook his head. “I’m sorry. She’s...” he hesitated, trying to think of the right way of phrasing things, without giving too much away. “She’s from a very traditional people. Some of the elders didn’t even want her to go to a white school. They have medicines we cannot begin to understand, spiritual ways that will help to cleanse her mind, which will help the body. Physically there isn’t a concern. Mentally... she’s not coping well. She needs her people, the support of the women of her tribe. They have ways of handling this kind of thing that will make her whole again and I’m afraid the longer I wait to get her to them the harder their job will be.”

The Inspector sipped his coffee, mulling it over.

Henry tossed in his two cents. “Not to mention, they’ve asked you to bring her home at once.”

“There is that,” he nodded. “Inspector. I was very lucky to get permission from her people to marry her. If I keep her from them in this time of crisis, they might withdraw that. So if you don’t mind...”

He nodded. “I understand. My concern is getting you there safely and your security once there. Where exactly are her people?”

“Silver Rose Mountain Reservation. It’s just northwest of Dauphin. Trust me, it’s a safe place. They are very strict about visitors. If he *does* go there, he will severely regret it, ...if he can even find her,” Thomas assured him.

The inspector still seemed undecided. “I’d still want to call the local RCMP, let them know you are coming. Have them keep their heads up. You will have to bring her back when we catch him, you do realize that? Or we won’t be able to hold him, not for long. We’ll need her testimony.”

“Oh, that shouldn’t be a problem,” he exclaimed with more assurance than he felt. “She has a scholarship that she worked very hard to get. She won’t just let that go. We’ve already rented a place for the fall. It’s just... we can’t move in until August and we can’t keep relying on friends for a place to stay, not for a whole summer.”

Leverel nodded. “Very well. But I want a way to reach you.”

Thomas shifted uncomfortably. “There’s only one phone on the whole reservation and... I don’t know the number off hand.”

The inspector sighed. “It’s all right. I’m sure the Aboriginal department in

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Dauphin would have that information. When are you going to leave?”

“As soon as I get back. ...If that’s ok?”

“Fine, fine. You get her taken care of. We’ll need her clear headed and able to face him when we bring him in for trial. I’m going to have Weathers, the man in the gold car, follow you as far out of town as he thinks necessary, make sure you aren’t followed. From there you’re on your own,” he warned. “I’d send some one with you all the way, but I just don’t have the budget, the authority or the man power for it. Be careful. Let me recommend that you stop often but only in populated places. Look out points along the mountains are acceptable so long as you are not the only people there. You’ll want witnesses in case anything happens. Watch for cars that look alike. If you think you’ve seen the same car pass you too many times, find an alternate route.”

“We’ll take every precaution, sir,” Thomas assured him as they rose. The inspector led them to the door, shook both young men’s hands. When he had Thomas, he used the hand to pull him a little closer, and asked in a low tone, “Have you any form of... self protection?”

Thomas held his breath for a second. He decided to tell. It wasn’t as if the man couldn’t look it up if he wanted to. “Yes, sir, I do. I have my father’s service revolver.”

“With you?”

“Not here,” he explained. “It’s at Joseph’s, in my suitcase.”

The inspector opened the door. “Don’t go anywhere without it again. If you don’t have a permit to carry it concealed, get one,” he advised.

“Yes, sir.”



Hecuba stood in front of the mirror admiring her handiwork. She was a bit uncomfortable in Nea’s clothes. She needed a belt to keep from losing the jeans as her hips were a bit more narrow than Nea’s, but the airy, embroidered tunic covered it well. Nea sat on the bureau top next to Gaganan, amazed by the resemblance. She could have been looking into a mirror,... well, had she been human at the moment. “What do you think?” Hecuba asked them.

It was strange for Gaganan to hear Hecuba’s voice coming out of Nea’s mouth. He comforted himself by licking the back of Nea’s head. She growled at him, reached back to smooth down the fur he had brushed up the wrong way but held

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her paw up, giving her the best thumbs up a squirrel could manage.

Anang stepped up behind Hecuba, adjusted one of the braids. She smiled. “Nice work. Want to test it out?” she asked with a wicked grin.

Hecuba looked over her shoulder at Anang. “They’re back?”

Anang nodded. Nea, excited, started to dash out of the bedroom towards the living room, but Anang caught her mid-spring. “Oh, no you don’t. If you go out there right now you’ll spoil the game.” She gestured for the cat to follow Hecuba.

Gaganan trotted alongside her, more than eager to see the reaction. He was not disappointed. Both men did a complete double take. It wasn’t until Hecuba laughed that they realized what they were seeing. When Nea heard Gaganan laughing, she wiggled out of Anang’s grasp and darted into the room, rebounded off the back of the couch and sprang lightly to Thomas’s good shoulder, nuzzling up under his ear. He brushed his cheek along her back. “I missed you, too, kitten. Nice job, Hecuba. I think even Jonah’d be fooled.”

Henry chuckled. “Boy, that would be a right nasty surprise for him if he tried anything, wouldn’t it?”

She glared facetiously at him. “You don’t know the half of it.” But strangely, she sobered, “Though from what I saw of him last... I don’t think I alone could take him. From what Nea was telling me last night about the ritual, he literally ate his mentor. Sucked all his power right out of him. He’s not in complete control of it yet, doesn’t know the extent of things, but give him enough time....”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” Thomas sighed. “We all packed?”

Joseph came in through the back door, wiped his feet. “Everything I could fit into the Pinto, yes. I put one of Nea’s and one of Hecuba’s suitcases in the car, the rest I’ll put in the van. That way neither one of them is without too long.”

“You coming?” Thomas asked, sitting down at the kitchen table with some paper and a pen.

“Tomorrow,” Anang answered. “I want to get some things done in the greenhouse, gather some things to take up there; give that man in the car down the street a chance to not notice we’re one woman short.”

Thomas began to write a letter to his mother. It was slow going writing with his off-hand. “I’ll call Mabel and let her know you’re coming, what’s going on. She was going to spend time with her daughter this summer, but the delay... She’ll appreciate the vacation.”

Everyone got busy, making final preparations and adjustments. Hecuba had Henry wedge Princess’s tank behind the passenger seat in the Pinto, made sure she

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was snug, safe and covered, though able to get plenty of air. Henry was a bit standoffish, more so than normal. He was having difficulty reconciling the knowledge that it was Hecuba with the appearance of Nea; which of course was best all around for the 'show and tell'. Anang loaded up a picnic basket and a cooler of drinks, then spent a few minutes saying her own goodbyes.

Thomas finished his letter with Nea sprawled over his shoulder reading as he wrote. It was short and simple, repetitive and to the point. He handed it to Henry in an envelope. "Hopefully she will remember you. Just keep telling her you're bringing her to me, that I have a surprise for her, a girl I want her to meet. Go with whatever she thinks is going on. If she thinks you're taking her to meet my father, go with it."

Henry wasn't comfortable with that. "But... isn't that cruel? To have her expect one thing and get another?"

Thomas sighed, shook his head. "You'll have problems otherwise. She'll forget constantly. Just go with whatever will get her to the Mountain. If she starts to doubt, remind her about the letter. Don't let her lose it. In fact, tell her to bring me a present. Help her wrap one of the books in my room. Having the present on her lap during the trip will help keep her focused. Just... try not to lose patience with her too much. I wish I could go with you but I think the squirrel would be too much for her."

"She afraid of squirrels?" Hecuba asked. She could sympathize.

"No, but if she should involuntarily change forms..." he said pointedly. "Best to approach things slowly."

Henry nodded, putting the letter for Mrs. Harlan with the two signed release forms that would allow them to take her from the nurse and clear up any problems should she cause trouble en-route.

"We'll meet you there tomorrow night," Joseph said, passing a large thermos full of coffee to Hecuba. "It's three hours to your mother's and another eleven to the reservation, so it's better if we don't try to hole up in a hotel overnight. Too risky."

Thomas nodded. "I'll let Mabel know," he said and went to make the call.



Nea waited until they were well out of the neighbourhood before she crept out of Thomas's sling. She had lain very still and been careful not to jostle his shoulder too much. It was too hot out for him to have gotten away with even his denim jacket. She climbed up to his good shoulder, glanced behind him to where Gaganan

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had stretched out in the window to sun himself. Hecuba and Thomas both kept glancing back in the mirrors to keep track of the gold car. They didn't notice anything else out of the ordinary and eventually began to relax a hair or two. Nea could tell he was still tense, however and nuzzled him.

About an hour out of town, Gaganan, who had rolled to face behind them, raised his head and chirruped for attention. *He's leaving.*

Hecuba glanced up in the rear-view back at the cat. "What is it? See something?"

Nea barked, shook her head.

Thomas twisted his head to look at her. "What then?"

Nea tapped her breast where a badge would sit then waved goodbye.

He frowned. "Cop?" She nodded. "Leaving?" Again she gave a nod. He sank back in his seat. "Great. We're on our own from here."

Hecuba frowned, glanced back again. "Let the wild rumpus start," she sighed, reaching for the coffee.



They stopped a total of seven times along the way. Nea asked Gaganan to see if he could get a few spirits to keep watch for Jonah, but they reported nothing that magical for kilometres. She relayed the information by scrawling on a notepad, though even the stub of a pencil she was using was almost unwieldy. Thomas and Hecuba relaxed enough to stop at an old fashioned car hop for dinner. They were eating in the car, listening to the 50's music that was playing over the speakers outside and laughing when Hecuba noticed a police car slide by behind them. She said nothing, poured some water into the thermos cup and set it where Gaganan and Nea could both get to it and not spill it.

Nea was digging through a can of roasted nuts looking for a cashew when there came a knock on the driver's window that made everyone jump. Nea fell into the can, upsetting it in her haste to get out and scramble behind Thomas's neck, hiding under his hair. She peered out as Hecuba rolled down the window.

"Yes, officer?" she asked, coughing. She had swallowed soda the wrong way when she was startled by her.

The policewoman smiled. "I'm sorry to scare you folks like that. You all right?" she asked Hecuba, concerned with the coughing fit. Hecuba nodded.

Thomas reached back and brushed Nea's heaving sides. "We're fine, officer.

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What can we do for you?”

“You Thomas Harlan and Sooneewah Mageeway?” she asked, glancing at a note pad.

“Yes, ma’am,” Thomas answered. “And it’s Sooneawa. What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. The RCMP put out a bulletin on you guys, asked us to keep an eye out for trouble. Since you were stopped, I thought I’d take a moment to find out if you have noticed anything in particular? Anything out of the ordinary?”

“Not so far,” Thomas said. “We were playing leap frog with one of those fancy four-wheel drives for about three or four hours coming out of Alberta, but we didn’t see it again after Saskatoon.”

“Well, all right. You keep sharp.” She waved and headed back to her patrol car.

“That was nice to know,” Hecuba mumbled, clearing her throat as she rolled up the window.

“However,” Thomas grumbled, beginning to collect his trash and pick up the nuts Nea had scattered, “it means we’ll have to call Inspector Leverel to confirm our safe arrival.”

“Minor inconvenience,” she shrugged, reaching into the cooler for a stronger source of caffeine.



Jonah leaned casually back against the frame of the phone booth. From this angle he could see everyone who approached, and few could hear him if they passed. Glass booths like this were going the way of the dodo and he kind of regretted that. They afforded a measure of privacy and dulled the ambient noise to make oneself heard. Not to mention filtering out the majority of sounds that could identify locations. He waited for the other end to be picked up. The voice was familiar and sleepy. “Yeah?”

“Wake up, Coleman,” he said in a cold voice.

He could tell the man on the other end was awake in an instant. “Jonah?” he exclaimed with delight. “How’s it, man? When you going to join us? We’re havin’ a blast. The girls down here are tanned, lean and gorgeous! Racked, stacked and on display, man! Not to mention...” he was interrupted by a comment from Tolby on the next bed. “Oh, right, your project. How’s that going, by the way?” Coleman asked, though he sounded slightly less cheerful.

“I need some information only you can give,” Jonah said, his tone unchanged.

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He could almost see the blood draining from Coleman's face, grinned.

"Whwhat kind?"

"The same as before. I need to know where she lives."

"Whwhere she lives?" he echoed weakly.

There was a sound from the other bed, a voice loud enough even Jonah understood. "He lost her?"

"Idiots and fools and their arrogance and miscalculations. Someone stepped up my timetable and she slipped through the cracks," he ground.

Tolby was apparently listening, had pulled the phone close enough to hear and speak as well. Jonah did not mind. He was the smarter of the two anyway, had the thicker backbone. "Your professor?"

"Made an amateur mistake," Jonah informed him. "Let us just say that I have graduated and that *I* am the professor now."

"Grats," they both replied. Only Tolby sounded like he meant it.

"But what do you need from me?" squeaked Coleman. "I don't have access to records from Florida."

"I want what is in your inadequately stuffed skull," Jonah growled. "*Remember*," he intoned, putting his will behind the word, not sure if its power would carry over wires. "Where does she live?"

"At Randall, I told you..." He was apparently struck by Tolby.

"Not *that* address, moron. Where she lived before coming to school. Where her transcripts are mailed."

"Oh, right. Manitoba. Some place called Silver Rose Mountain."

Jonah committed that to memory, watching an Edmonton patrol car drive past. He smiled and waved. "I'll need more than that, Coleman. She could be anywhere on that mountain."

"It was a reservation, Jonah. There was no other address. Maybe they're too poor or primitive to have formal streets or individual mailboxes. Apparently the postman knows where to deliver. It's all I got. I remember that much 'cause I thought it odd at the time. None of the other aborigines had addys like that."

Jonah sighed. This would make things harder. So long as she was with Harlan, and he was not likely to step away from her at this point, he would be unable to sense her power signature. But, there had to be something to this mountain. It was a reservation, its boundaries would be clearly marked, and the living area couldn't be that big. He would have to chance it.

Tolby had taken the phone away. "You going to join us when you reacquire?"

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“Too risky. At this point the authorities are involved. I will have to go farther south.”

“Well, keep in touch, with me at least,” he added in a lower voice. “And thanks a lot for the use of the condo. Give me a buzz when you get settled. We can all go live like kings in the Carib.”

“I may do that, Tolby,” he smiled. He would need a lackey, after all. “But if I do... lose the fat man. He’s starting to ...weaken.”

Tolby growled. “Starting to have a case of the Jiminy Crickets.”

That did not bode well. Apparently the man’s weakness could override his control if left out of his presence too long. “I may have to ask you to deal with the situation,” he hinted.

Tolby chuckled. “Already thought of that. There’d be no questions, either. Just say the word,” he said, sounding like he had been suffering for a long time.

“I will leave that to your discretion.”

There was the sound of flushing from the distance and Tolby changed both tone and subject cheerfully. “Naw, she’s a long legged blonde. Drop dead gorgeous. Been teaching me surfing. Been trying to get Coleman to go, but he prefers snorkeling.”

Jonah grinned, “Well, if you think you will need the help, add a few drops of the following tincture to his tea,” he listed off a few herbal ingredients. “The tea will cover the taste. The drug will evaporate fairly quickly after it takes effect leaving no trace if a body is ever found, and will not take visible effect for several hours. Take him snorkeling immediately after, or better yet, diving. Once in the deeper environment he will lose all sense of orientation. Drowning should follow shortly.”

Tolby laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind. Later.”

Jonah hung up the phone, confident matters in Florida would go to his advantage. He pulled a small compact mirror from his pocket, checked his glamour and disguise. He chanted a spell, tested the altered voice in the booth. It sounded suitably feminine. He pocketed the mirror and left the phone booth with his few bags, hailed a cab to the airport.



Hecuba, Thomas and Nea had no other incidents the remainder of the trip. They arrived at the reservation just past two in the morning. Thomas had managed to catch a few, albeit pain pill enforced, hours of sleep, but Hecuba was exhausted.

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By the time they had begun the long, lonely drive up the mountain, her glamour had long since dropped. Newin was at the gate to meet them, sitting up with the sentry and led them to Tuwe and Meme's house. He sent Hecuba on in with a promise to look after Princess for her. She staggered inside and was half asleep before Meme guided her to the guest bed.

Thomas was awake enough to tell Newin where the snake's tank was, told him that everything else could wait til morning. He was about to ask where he was sleeping when Nea tugged on his ear. He looked at her, saw her pointing to an owl in a nearby tree. She was a mouse. He shielded her, prepared for the owl to launch at her, but Nea was squeaking at the bird.

Yes, owl? she asked.

Spider, it said, turning its head to observe the brush.

What about Spider?

Go.

Go to Spider's? When? Now?

The owl turned to sedately observe them. *Now.* With that it flew off.

Nea squeaked over at Gaganan who had jumped up onto the hood of the car to take advantage of the heat. *Lead Thomas to Spider's. We stay the night there I think.*

That what the old who-who want?" he sighed, jumping down.

Yes, she replied, tapping Thomas's cheek and pointing at Gaganan and then made shooing motions.

Thomas frowned. "Follow him?" he asked. This would be so much easier if the cat liked parrots, he thought, but no, he had to be the mighty squirrel hunter. When Nea nodded, he grabbed the backpack Anang had helped him fill with a change of clothes for Nea and other immediate necessities and trudged off into the dark after the cat.

Newin closed the car door with his hip, snake tank in arm and noticed Thomas walking off. "Hey, brother, where you going?"

He turned, walked backwards for a moment, shrugged. "Haven't the foggiest. Owl told Nea something, she says follow the cat."

"At least take a lamp," he suggested, nodding his head to the lit oil lantern hanging on a hook just outside his brother's door. "It's dark out there."

"If you think he won't mind. Gaganan, hold up," he called, quickly went over and took the lamp down. Once he had light to see by, he followed the cat up the path into the darkest part of the wood.

The way was simple and peaceful at first. But after about a half kilometre, the

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path was narrower, more twisting, and the light seemed to reflect off a million eyes in the trees. The whole forest seemed alive and rustling, breathing. A few owls flew through, in every direction, coming and going. When they reached the small domed hovel that was Spider's house, they were startled to realize that it served as one giant bird's nest. There were birds all over it, having made their homes in the thatch, added their own touches to make it more comfortable and to separate it from their neighbours. Smoke rose from a hole in the centre and light filtered past the hide flap covering the door.

Nea could hear whispers in the darkness, barely intelligible conversations. Things like **Speaker bringa whiterman** and **Darkowl touch, chicka nosee** and **This notta bodewall**. She could only imagine what this would be like in the day, with thousands of voices screaming at once. It was obvious now why Spider lived so far away. She could only wonder why they had never heard the noise in the main village.

Before Thomas could figure out how to announce his presence at the flap, the familiar voice cackled at him. "*Just pull it back and get in here, boy?*"

Thomas sighed, did as he was told. He held the flap for the cat, then followed him in with Nea.

The large raven's head turned to Gaganan, **Noooooot!** he hissed, clacking his beak.

The old woman, sitting on the far side of her fire smoking a pipe, sighed and reached her hand out to the cat. Curious though uncertain, he approached her, let her run her blind hand over his head and through his fur. She then cupped his chin and lifted it to cast his eyes into her blind ones. "*I am sorry, furred-brother. But I need to be able to converse with her, and so long as you are here, she is no bird, has no voice. Go hunting. There is a frog pool just southeast. No birds. Not here,*" she said firmly, "*I will send for you when you can return.*"

Gaganan heaved a heavy sigh, pushed at her hand to show he understood, then crossed to where Thomas had seated himself on the opposite side of the fire. He put his paws on his shoulder to reach up and nose Nea. **Fill me in. I'll be back.**

You could lie down just outside the flap and listen in.

I could. But I was not asked to, he insisted. He licked her and disappeared into the night.

Nea shifted into the small parrot she had been using for talking. "*Grandmother,*" she nodded.

The old woman sighed, offered Thomas the pipe. Out of politeness he

accepted a puff or two, but gracefully declined it after that. *“What you have gotten yourself into, little Silver? More important, what you intend to do about it?”*

“Well,” Thomas began. *“I think it might be best not to approach Him sleeping. That much is clear. That and not running. But there is not much story-wise about those who came upon it waking beyond that they were inexorably drawn to it by its nature and magic. My immunity may protect us from that.”*

“Your magic may be the very thing needed. But how do you intend to wake Him?”

“Very carefully?” Nea chirped.

Thomas shrugged, trying to remember everything he had learned about this place and the creature it guarded. *“Gunshot maybe?”*

The old woman made a face of impressed surprise. *“Might work. Be a little abrupt though. Might wake Him in a bad mood.”*

“The only other thing I can think of is to make our way to the Heart and call to Him. Plead forgiveness, make an offering and our case. But what gift do you bring to the great serpent?” Thomas replied.

The old woman sat in silence for a long while, smoking her pipe. The great raven watched everything with his solemn, dark eye. It crossed Nea’s mind to wonder why she had not shifted in the Raven’s presence, remembering that ravens occasionally ate small animals as well. Finally Spider spoke. *“This you will do. Tonight you will sleep. Tomorrow, come dawn you will walk up the mountain to the cave at the peak and enter with your woman but no weapons, they will avail you naught. And no Nijii,”* she added, glaring at Nea.

“He’s not going to like that.”

“He can follow you to the edge of the peak if he dares. But he may not descend with you into the mine. Need I mention to you,” she said, turning back to Thomas and pointing the stem of her pipe at him, *“that everything above the streamline is His? And to touch or take it...”* she stopped as he shook his head.

“No, ma’am,” he finally said, suddenly remembering she was blind and forgetting for a second that she saw through the great bird. *“Thank you for your advice, your wisdom and hospitality.”*

She shrugged. *“It’s in my best interests,”* she said, her blind eyes boring into Nea’s. *“I help or I do not get what was promised to me.”*

Thomas had an idea the old woman knew more of what was going on than she was telling. He had seen the concern and worry in Newin’s face when he met them, in the face of the other sentry at the gate. None of that seemed to touch this old

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woman. He had no idea what this promise might be, but he felt no ill will from her in any sense.

Gaganan strode into the hut, butting his head against Thomas, sniffing Nea. *Good hunt?* she asked him.

Was until this block-headed bird made a splash-down attack on a bullfrog and scared the rest of them into the deeper waters, he complained.

Nea chuckled.

Thomas made himself comfortable where Spider had pointed out for him to, laying on his good side. The cat curled up against him, and Nea against Gaganan and together, all three of them managed to get some much needed sleep.



Tired as they were, all three of them would have slept until nearly noon had they been left to their own. They were not. As the grey light of dawn neared, the birds that made their nests on Spider's house and in the trees that surrounded it woke and began their morning chatter as they prepared to fly off hunting. The night birds passed in and around the hut, passing their whispers to a listening Memory, telling her all they had seen in the night. The sound was deafening.

Thomas groaned and rolled over, gasped in pain as he forgot the tenderness of his shoulder. He sat up, fought his way out of his shirt. Nea and Gaganan blinked up at him, Nea regretting she could do nothing for him.

Thomas tried to remove the dressing on his wound, but was unable to reach it or even see what he was doing. He sighed. "Gaganan, would you be so kind as to go for a short walk? I need her as something a little more 'handy'."

The cat blinked at him, understanding, though thoroughly disliking the need for the request. *I need to visit the bushes anyway,* he sniffed.

Nea butted her head against the underside of his chin. *Thanks. Hopefully this will end today.*

One can hope, he breathed as he strode out of the hut. *And pray,* he added.

Once he was out of sight, Nea shifted into a raccoon, though the act took several minutes. It was a form she had never explored before. Thomas turned his back to her. "Would you check the stitches for me?"

She helped him to peel off the old bandage and dressing, frowned to see the line of neat stitches that held the skin together. She was surprised they had not used

the usual adhesives. The last time she had known anyone who had gotten a severe injury, they had returned from the ER with this clear purple glue-like substance on the cut. The edges of the wound were jagged, and slightly reddened, though she saw no evidence of pus or serious infection.

“It itches,” he complained.

“*Well, she ain’t gonna scratch it,*” came Spider’s voice from behind them. Nea looked up to see the Raven peering closely at the injury. The bird cawed and clacked at his companion. “*I’ve got a jar of honey on that shelf to your right. Put it on the wound and cover it with a fresh bandage. That’ll kill any infection.*”

While Nea fetched the honey pot, Thomas gingerly opened their pack and pulled out a change of dressing, as well as the bottle of antibiotics the doctor had given him. He slipped the pain pills back into the pack. As much as he needed them, he could not afford to be impaired this morning.

Nea smeared the honey on his shoulder carefully, trying not to press too hard or hurt him. She felt a little like a child finger-painting. However, this time it was acceptable to lick the ‘paint’ from her fingers when she was done.

“*Ok, that feels weirder than the stuff the doc put on it,*” he chuckled. “*I’m not going to be attracting flies and other insects am I?*”

The old woman shrugged. “*If a fly wants to lay its eggs there, let it. It’ll keep it from going green on you.*” She watched as Nea sucked the last of the honey from her small fingers, and then tried to apply the bandage. It was awkward, tricky work, but she managed it. “*Now, drink the tea I made. It’ll help with the pain. You’ll need your head about you today, not white man’s poisons.*”

Thomas eased into his shirt with Nea’s help, looped the sling over his neck. He stared down at the bottle of pills, felt the Raven’s eyes boring into him and decided he could take them later. If there was a later. He stuffed them back in the bag and accepted the small teacup the raccoon passed to him.

Gaganan returned as Spider finished baking the small cornmeal cakes she had been frying on a rock in her fire. Thomas helped to serve out the breakfast, grateful that nothing heavier had been offered. His belly was already in knots and he did not know if he could have stomached anything more. Nea, once more a squirrel, dipped some of the cake in the honey before she gave it to the cat. Spider nibbled and drank her tea and watched the three of them with a fierce intensity. If they had not known the bird was the old woman’s eyes, they might have suspected the creature was sizing up which of them to eat first.

When they had fed and were ready to begin their journey, Spider spoke again.

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“I have something for you,” she said.

The Raven tossed aside some skins in a corner and walked over to Thomas with a leaf-wrapped packet in his beak. Thomas accepted it with a bow of his head, thanking the bird who sedately returned to his place behind his companion.

“Give that to the old horned snake. There is Deer’s Tongue and other things appropriate to gift Spirits with. And something else. Tell the Guardian that I have not forgotten.”

Thomas frowned, confused, but bowed his head reverently to the old woman. *“Thank you. When I can hunt again, I will bring you meat.”*

She waved her hand dismissively. *“Bah! Like I can chew it at my age.”* she exclaimed, though he could tell by the softening of the lines around her eyes that the gesture was appreciated for what it was. *“Do not mistake,”* she warned. *“What you will face up there is no spirit. Not in the usual sense of the word. What you will meet there will be Blood and horn and bone and fang. But it is a spirit too, and more awake than most. Treat it as both and you may yet survive. Now go. Get out of my sight.”*

With a final nod Thomas obeyed, taking up their pack on his good shoulder and leaving the hut with Nea on Gaganan’s back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN:

UKTENA

Together Thomas, Nea and Gaganan began the ascent up the mountain. Nea clung to the cat's back as he picked his way up the trail, constantly on the lookout for other predators who might try to make a quick snack of his companion. He needn't have worried. Their way was guarded by birds under orders from Spider. In fact, when they reached a place where the path curved more sideways than up, a brightly coloured bird Thomas did not know called out to them, leaning forward on a branch just off the trail and chirruping at them.

Stoppa stoppa go this way.

Nea barked to get Thomas's attention pointed to the bird. He looked up at it then at the non-existent trail that would lead them down if they went that way, then looked down at Nea. "We have to follow it, don't we?"

She nodded. He sighed, adjusted his sling, made sure the packet for Uktena was secure, took a firmer grip on his walking stick and stepped off the path. The going was not rough for long, but it did not become easy. There were brambles to circumvent and rock falls to clamber over. He was just wondering how the miners ever got their equipment up here when he realized they were following what might have been a waggon track a century or more ago. It was overgrown to the point of being unrecognizable, but his foot had slipped into one of the ruts, unseen for the weeds and high grass. He had moved a few feet to the left and stumbled into another one. He caught his balance and paused, looked the area over. 'I should have realized it sooner,' he thought. There were no real trees in the path, nothing more

than saplings and scrub, though there were fairly thick scrub oak and pine along side.

He started to comment when the bird, who had been leading them on from branch to branch, now laughed and flew off. *He gettagetit!*

Nea shook her head and hugged Gaganan tighter.

The sun was already at quarter mast when they reached the stream. It was a different part of the rivulet than where Thomas had first met Spider, but he was positive it was the same one. He stepped gingerly across it, looking back to see if there was an easy way for the cat or if he had to lift the two of them over. Gaganan had sat down, shivered.

Nea lifted her head from his neck fur. *What is it?*

The cat shivered. *I... I can't go any farther. I know I'd be safe near him, but... something in me...* Nea got down, walked to stand in front of him, placing a hand on the thong around his neck which, though it no longer sported the room tab, still had the bobcat tooth on it.

He turned his head, looking at the branch of a dead tree that suddenly moved even though nothing was on it. He sighed, lowered his head, nodding. *It's ok,* he told Nea, touching his nose to hers. *Eagle says I'm not supposed to go. My job is in the village, assuring them that nothing has gone wrong... until it does... if it does. Beyond this point there are no animals... no spirits even, but for Uk... *Him*,* he said, catching himself. *You will be safe... until you enter the mine. Be careful,* he begged, began licking her cheeks.

Nea let him for a moment, until she was afraid he was going to comb the fur right off her face. She put a paw up, tipping his nose down so that she could press her forehead to his, licked the space between his eyes. *I love you too, old man,* she whispered.

Without another word, Gaganan turned and disappeared back down the trail with a rush of wind following him. Nea turned back to Thomas, trying not to feel the need to weep. She shifted into a small grey parrot and leapt into the air, landing nimbly on his good shoulder. "From here we're on our own," she said. "I've... never been this far."

"I got to the stream. But that's it," he replied, then turned and began to make his way towards the peak.

It took them another hour to reach the rocky ground just outside the cave opening. It had been an unnerving journey, crossing wilds which should have been roaring with life, the sounds of insects and birds and lizards. Instead, it had been

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dead silent save for the wind in the trees, and even that seemed hushed. Off to the left of the squared off, natural mouth was the overgrown remains of an old mining waggon, dry-rotting in the sun. The opening was vaguely door shaped, though tilted backwards against the peak and was nearly as wide as it was tall. It narrowed swiftly as it curved away into darkness.

Thomas took a deep breath, rubbed his cheek against Nea's wing. "You ready for this?"

"It seems like I've been waiting my whole life for this," she sighed. She was on edge, but her animal senses, which had been screaming at her back at the creek, had silenced once she had perched on Thomas's shoulder. What was left was anticipation of a kind she had not realized she had felt. "Do it."

Thomas unhooked the flashlight from his belt, clicked it on and set it, facing outward, in his right hand. He shifted the grip on his walking stick with his good hand and proceeded into the tunnel of cold grey stone. The light persisted only a little farther, then they had to rely on the beam of the flashlight. Every five feet he would swing the oak stick against the wall, pause to listen to the clack echoing into the depths. He was careful where he put his feet. There were loose rock and debris all over the place.

The walls glittered in places, the light refracting off small crystals imbedded with the white blotches and bands and streaks of black. The air had an acrid, bitter scent and had a tight, damp feel to it. It was not stale, however it was expected to be. From somewhere deep inside a light breeze circulated, very faint. The throat of the mine had been chiseled at, exposing rich, broad veins of silver and lead. No tracks had been laid for mine carts, but Thomas supposed they had not been given time to lay any. The tunnel split off after a few hundred metres and it was easy to tell which part was mine and which natural cavern. They followed the mined tunnel, which grew narrower and shorter as it followed the spiralling vein. Another hundred in and the tunnel just ended.

Thomas flashed his light over the wall in front of him. It looked as if the miners had followed a vein sideways to this point where it had forked out into a myriad little capillaries. At about eye level and gleaming like it had been polished was a thready spiral of silver roughly in the shape of a rose in full bloom. Not the wild rose on the hillsides that Thomas had expected, but more like the imported Old World Roses that the miners would have been familiar with.

Awed, Thomas reached out with his hand and brushed his fingers over the smooth surface of the stone around the 'rose'. Instead of the expected chill of rock

and raw metal, it was warm to the touch.

There was a sudden, hissing breath that echoed through the tunnels, a scent that was both spicy and bitter, sweet with the fragrance of death. *“Touch not if you would leave alive.”*

Thomas jerked his hand back, spun, flashing the light up and down the tunnel. *“Who is there?”* he cried in Ojibwe, the language the voice had spoken. The voice was unmistakably feminine, though reedy. Certain sounds were prolonged improperly, others stumbled over, the words were spaced out unevenly as if speaking at all was difficult for the creature. There was another sound as well, in the background, a dull scraping, a laborious sound.

There was a deep, rumbling chuckle, as if the mountain itself were laughing. *“You called to me, invisible one. I am awake. I have come. Now tell me why.”*

Thomas glanced at Nea, shivering on his shoulder and spoke for them both. *“I come because you protect the Mainganoden People. We bring you an offering and a request.”*

“You are a fool. I protect the People from myself.”

“And their enemies,” Nea chirruped, with more bravery than she felt. *“This land is ours because of you.”*

“True. But you must be either very foolish or very desperate to risk what you do. I have no magic you can take from this place, and for me to leave it would be death to many. You must also know that to behold me is death.”

“To be drawn to you,” Thomas dared. *“If you will forgive me. And if the legends are to be believed in whole: if we behold you sleeping and run... but you are not sleeping, and we will not run. If we cross you waking, the heart will draw us to you and your waiting jaws if that is what you intend for us.”* He took a deep breath, *“But you needn’t intend death for us. I myself will provide you with meat if meat you desire or need, that you need not devour us. Only look once upon the woman I would have for a wife and make her whole again.”*

“I have no power to cure the sick or raise the dead,” came the hissing voice.

“It is no illness, great one, but a curse I need breaking,” said Nea.

“And what tale have you heard that told you I had the gift to break curses?”

“None. But a theory my man has... that your gaze might break the strictures of this curse.”

There was a moment of quiet, in which all they heard was the deep breathing and subtle shifting of something large deep within the heart of the mountain. *“Now tell me why I would do this? Why I should forgive my waking?”*

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Thomas and Nea looked at each other. *“Because you marked her as your own. You had your reasons for it. Surely they were not to end with her suffering beneath the curse of a vengeful white man who would have taken her far from you if he could. A curse that could very easily end her life.”* There was a hint of anger in Thomas’s voice, well controlled, but present.

There was a sibilant rustling, a great scraping of scale on stone. The voice sounded nearer, louder. *“Step away from your shield, girl,”* the voice ordered. *“You will know when to stop.”*

Nea, with a glance at Thomas, obeyed. She launched herself into the air and sailed through the beam of light. The moment she left the safety of Thomas’s aura she faltered, felt a great terror overcome her, threatening to burst her tiny heart with the racing of her blood. Thomas saw her fall, fluttering helplessly on the ground. Not caring if the creature granted him permission or not, he dropped the flashlight and rushed to her, lifting her in his hands and cradling her small body to his chest.

“What did you do!?” he yelled. *“She came to you for help!”*

The voice was calm, the movement ceased. *“I had to see her, young warrior. Had to see who she was. Why she panicked I can only guess. Take a woman’s form, silverchild, and we will talk.”*

“She can’t,” Thomas snapped. *“That’s why we are here.”*

There was another pause, thoughtful. *“Explain.”*

Thomas did as Nea struggled to get herself back under control. *“We think that if she comes face to face with a creature who’s favourite prey is man...”*

“It will break the curse,” the voice finished. *“But what makes you think I prey upon man?”*

Thomas’s tone when he answered was a bit sheepish. *“It is implied by the tales that you are ...indiscriminate. But we thought that you might know of some creature still alive that might work if you yourself will not.”*

“You have thought this through.”

“I am a desperate man, deeply in love,” he confessed.

“This I can respect. And you are a medicine shield, lucky you. Only one such as you could enter my domain and not fall prey to the curse upon me.” There was another shifting, and the voice seemed to grow farther away. *“Go back to the turning. Follow the light. And if you love her, keep her near.”*

Thomas walked as he was bade, found the way dimly lit, but it was more than enough. Ahead, he could hear the beast moving away, followed the sound as much as the light it gave off. *“Won’t I need to step away for you to work your magic on*

her?” he asked as he walked.

The slithering ahead stopped. “*Do you not even know your own magic?*” came the exasperated voice. “*What are they teaching the braves these days.*”

“*But, I have no magic,*” Thomas protested, confused. He kept his hand on the wall beside him, and his eyes on the ground before him as the tunnel became more of a crevice and a stream could be heard beside him in a deep crack along the edge of the opposite wall. “*I am a killer of magic, a nothing.*”

He could tell the creature had turned around up ahead, anger evident in her tone. “*Who told you you were a nothing?*”

Thomas stopped, stammered in the face of the unseen wrath. “*The... the villagers. Cold Heart said it, but the others agree, because they cannot feel me or sense my soul.*”

“*And your Memory has permitted this?*”

“*The Memory is old,*” Nea offered, “*And she lives apart from the village. Like as not she has not heard him called that.*”

“*Why? Why would the Memory live apart? The Memory is so obviously needed among you.*”

“*She is old, and... a little touched. And... she is a Bird Talker. The noise... I imagine it was too much for the village to take,*” Nea shrugged.

“*They so often are. How else do they come to know everything?*” the voice chuckled.

“*She was the first one to call me Medicine Shield,*” Thomas said as he thought about it.

“*Ask her to explain you. She has been one before, known and loved one. I will tell you this, your power affects only those magics which would act upon another. If her power has been tainted, the taint will continue to dictate how the power works, or does not. You will not matter, but that you protect her from the worst of me.*”

Nea nuzzled his cheek, kissing at him in her bird-like way.

“*So, I am not a nothing,*” he murmured.

“*There IS a nothing,*” she said, “*but you are not he. Now come, child.*”

Thomas heard her moving again and followed the soft sursurrounding sound and the white light that was steadily growing in spite of its moving away. The cavern was alternately wide and narrow, though it never tightened more than the height of a man. At the narrowest point, Nea noticed long white marks on the ceiling as if something hard had been dragged along it. She shivered. The sound of running water became louder and the cave almost hot.

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Just ahead they could hear the crack open into a deep cavern. The play of light had changed as if it suddenly were trying to fill a space too large for its intensity and the splash of running water echoed. The tunnel seemed to have spiralled off the cavern, untraveled from its wheel rather than opening into it, so that the right wall just stretched into the cavern and the left shielded you from the openness until you were standing in it. The end of that wall was knapped sharp, as Thomas found when he set his hand on it, preparing to step into the cavern beyond.

Suddenly something was in front of them, the large face broad and terrible, the mouth open and fanged and dripping, the breath fetid and smelling of rotten meat and sickness. Thomas took a step back, cutting his hand on the wall as he threw it up to ward the thing off. Nea shrieked, fell off his shoulder in her panic, though she did not fly away. She tried to cling to him, though feathers made for poor grip. Her bird-like cry of fright became strangled, shifting into a shrill of pain as her body contorted, began fighting itself to change.

Thomas forced himself to resist the urge to turn and look, faced the threat in front of them. He had dropped his walking stick a ways back, now had nothing to protect them with. The light was suddenly blinding, and the face, which had been there but an instant, seemed to be something else instead. Something long and thin whipped out, touched his hand, stroked along the cut that had been dripping blood on the floor. There was a warm, itching on his palm. He turned it, glanced at it. The deep injury he was positive had been there was nothing more than a line of smeared blood. The light's source tipped back a bit and he found himself staring a black scaled head in the face, and it seemed to be laughing at him.

“See to your woman and come deeper in. The light is better in here.”

He turned, looked behind him. Nea lay on the floor in a flannel nightshirt and a pair of leather panties. She was shivering in spite of the near heat in the cave. He knelt beside her, touched her cheek. “You ok?”

Still shivering, she nodded, grabbed his hand with hers, pressing it tighter to her. “That was... unpleasant.”

“I can imagine. Breaking a curse that doesn't want to be broken... Can you stand up?”

“I'll ... I'll be fine in a second.”

Thomas set their pack down, unzipped it and pulled out her buckskins. “I brought this just in case. I didn't know what you were wearing when it happened.”

She smiled, sat up and reached for the dress. “Thank you. What... what was that?” she asked, her eyes wide in the dim light. “That was *not* Ukt... Him... Her,”

she corrected and counter corrected herself, began unbuttoning her shirt.

“I think it was, but we can ask her in a moment. She wants us to go farther in.”

“Good,” she said, shrugging out of her shirt and pulling the dress over her head. “Cause I have more than a few questions for Her if she’ll answer them.”

When she was dressed, she shoved the flannel into the pack and tossed it over her own shoulders and arm in arm, the two of them rounded the sharp corner and entered Uktena’s cavern.

The room was immense. The walls were smoothed to a point halfway up to the five metre high ceiling which was decorated with stalactites and glittering crystals amid the black and white veins in the natural rock. Along the walls there were obvious veins of silver, highly polished by whatever had smoothed the stone. The cave floor formed a bowl beside which ran the stream, more exposed here and closer to the surface, which gave off a light steam and warmed the room. It smelled of rock and minerals and hot water. There was no trace of the stench they had smelled when the creature confronted them. There were a few flattened stalagmites in the bowl that oddly resembled a table and three seats. Curled up in an indentation that occupied most of the bowl was the Uktena.

She was magnificent. Her body resembled a black serpent whose body was easily the girth of a decent oak. The smooth black scales were broken up by bands of red and yellow and a line of white spots that ran halfway down the back and belly. On her angular head a pair of antlers tilted slightly back, their tips whitened and worn down where they had scraped low ceilings. In the centre of her brow a clear jewel was imbedded. It was rounded like a cabochon, but clear like a diamond, though there was a faint red thread through it that seemed to pulse with her heartbeat. Here, in the cavern, where the light filled a larger area, the brightness that flared forth from it seemed lessened, enabled one to look upon it without being blinded.

Nea and Thomas both respectfully bowed their heads to it as it raised up from its own coils to regard them.

“Don’t just stand there, come in. Sit. I haven’t had a visitor in... oh dear... I have no way of telling you how long. Let’s see, he said something about a war going on to the south, one nation tearing itself apart over slaves.”

Thomas swallowed. *“That would be the American Civil War, and that was about a hundred and forty years ago.”*

The creature sighed. *“A less than half the time I’ve been here. It is a great pity he never came back. I could have rested at last.”*

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Thomas suddenly remembered the package in his sling. "Oh!" he exclaimed, pulling it out. "*Yellowbuck said to give you this.*"

Uktena glanced over at him. "*What is it? Spirit offerings,*" she sniffed, uninterested. "*I am beyond the need for them.*"

"*Actually, there is something else,*" he murmured, feeling the hard lump inside the bundle of leaves. "*Yellowbuck said to tell you she has not forgotten.*"

She heaved a sigh, began piling her coils. "*I know no Yellowbuck.*"

"*She is our current Memory,*" Nea offered.

"*Ah. Well, what is it? I haven't fingers to unwrap gifts,*" she prompted.

Thomas and Nea entered the bowl together and he set the package on the stone 'table', had Nea help him unwrap it. Inside were deer tongue leaves wrapped around a carved bracelet of ivory. Nea picked it up, turned it over in the light from the Uktena's brow. It was carved with animals chasing each other. She could just make out a great bear, and seals or otters, maybe a whale on the well-worn trinket. She guessed it might have been Inuit, but very old and yellow with age. It had to have been carved from a walrus tusk.

The light grew brighter as the great head neared hers. Nea turned, found herself inches from an angular head almost as tall as she was. She held the bracelet out so she could see it. There was a great intake of breath. "*Where? She... Ah, yes,*" she murmured dreamily. "*She is a memory. She would have known.*"

"*What is it?*" Thomas asked, wincing from the ache in his shoulder.

"*It was mine a very long time ago. Be so kind,*" she said, angling her head so that an antler was within reach. "*I would wear it again.*"

Not knowing what else to do, Nea slipped it onto the antler until it stopped, then twisted it to make sure it would not slip off with a careless tip of the head. She stood there, her hands less than a foot from the pulsing jewel. The antler felt like any other she had ever held, the scales where her arm had brushed them, like any other snake's, though one of them would have barely fit in the palm of her hand. The Uktena raised her head so that their eyes were level and she could see herself reflected in the bright depths. She was amazed and curious at her own lack of fear.

They regarded each other for a long minute before the creature pulled back, settling onto her coils and making herself comfortable. "*You have questions, child. Ask them.*"

Nea sat down on the nearest 'stool'. "*What was that thing that broke the curse?*" she asked bluntly.

Thomas sat beside her, awestruck and silent, content just to be near her. He

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could not understand her sudden calm. She had not left his safety zone, so it was not anything the creature could have done to her. Maybe it was the fact that the creature could have swallowed them both by now and hadn't. Maybe it was the tired, grandmotherly voice. Whatever it was, it was working.

"That thing was me."

"It didn't look like you."

The beast chuckled. *"I do not look like me. ...Not anymore."*

Nea thought about that for a moment, tilted her head. *"Are you willing to explain that?"*

The Uktena's head cocked in the opposite direction of Nea's, regarding her intently as if able to stare deep into her soul. *"You are hoping it will tell you why I marked you. What I want of you,"* she stated flatly.

Lowering her eyes for the first time since the creature invited them to sit down, Nea nodded.

"I will tell you a story then, one no one else has ever heard. One I doubt even the Memory knows all of; though if she does, she will never tell. You know the stories told of Uktena, and how the heart came to lie here instead of in a Cherokee swamp in the southern mountains. But stories are not always the truth. And the keeper changes things. It is true that the thief brought it here, and died here by the wrath of the spirit within. It is true that the son of the first chief Mainganoden, from whom we name ourselves, found the heart and learned its secrets, learned that it could protect as well as destroy, learned to appease it. What you have forgotten is how. He did it by giving himself to it. He made the sacrifice for the tribe, made this a protected place for all the magic children. What is not known is that he did not do this by dying, but by living. I am not the Uktena." She paused in her story, watched them carefully, smiling as the shock registered.

"I was a Shaper named Bedowe," she continued. *"When I was a girl becoming a woman, I underwent the Vision Quest as we all must. I was called here. I was afraid, as was my family. They mourned me as I set out, certain I would never return. What I found was this cavern and a very tired old man. He explained to me his charge, a duty handed down to us long before the white man came. Even in my time I had heard of them, even seen one, knew of the devastation to the south. We had heard that they had angered the Cro-ottowa, disturbed the resting place of the heart they had forgotten about and lost whole villages to its wrath. We had one or two refugees of that place but they said little of what actually happened. They walked like men dead, seeing little. We feared the white man, and the old man told*

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me we were not wrong to do so. He told me they were coming here and that he was too old, granted long life as he was, to hold them off or protect the heart from them. He needed a successor.”

Nea felt her heart skip a beat. It occurred to her, and Thomas as well, judging by the hand on her arm, that she was *this* Uktena’s replacement. ‘Would it be worse than being a Memory?’ she wondered.

“I was to be that successor. But I was not to lay down my life there and then. No. He would not do that to me, leave me with twenty lifetimes of regret. He bade me go home and live my life to the fullest, leave nothing undone that I held in my heart to do. I would know when to return. And so I did. I travelled, as women of our time did not do. I visited other tribes, gathering stories, telling them ours, giving them the warnings the old man had shared. I told them that the Mainganoden would take their magic children, teach them to be wonder workers in a place the white devils could not harm them or slay them as they did their own wonder workers. Even this Christ they placed so much faith in was slain for his miracles. Oh yes, I learned of him too. I heard the Jesuits. I listened to their words and walked away. They do not live by their own words.

“I found love, married, had children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren. My husband was the one that made me that bracelet. I lost it long ago. I was surrounded by family when I finally heard the call. I came. He died. My years of loneliness began. I, used to being surrounded by family... had no one. I was not prepared for that. For a while I had the animals. I was a Speaker and a Shaper. I was one of them. They kept me aware of my people. Occasionally, someone would come for guidance. The heart allows one to glimpse the future, to see beyond one’s immediate. Through it I watched the spread of the white man and what he did to my people. Through it I saw the other nations finally heeding my advice and sending their magic children to us for protection and teaching. Eventually, they stopped coming to me.

“The weight of the heart is heavy, I will not lie to you. The weight of the years is greater, I assure you. I took to hibernating. I became a bear and curled up around the heart to protect it, and slept. After a while, the winters became years. And as I slept, I began to dream.” Her eyes seemed to glow when she said this, staring off beyond them as if watching the march of centuries pass her by all over again. *“Nightmares, and good things. When that young man came I had been sleeping a long time. I discovered I had changed in my sleep to that which you now see. Though I could still change back then, though with great effort. We talked a long*

time. I liked him. I thought here might be my chance, someone to take over. I explained everything to him and he seemed to accept it. Promised to return, but... I think he died. I do not know for certain. I was not paying attention. Other things disturbed my rest.

“By the time the white man discovered my silver I could no longer change. I was Uktena. The miners fell prey as any other. They woke me with their thundering. My wrath was not my own but that of the beast I had become. When I realized what I had done I forced myself to sleep again, struggled to gain control of this thing within me. Oh, the voices... it speaks... it hungers... but I will not feed it. Never again. It obeys me now. But the curse remains. Did you know that the sun cursed the first Uktena for trying to kill her? That is why the light blinds and draws, that is why those who run lose everything. That is why the Uktena is cursed to eternal loneliness.” She sighed. *“Why I am cursed to eternal loneliness. As I became it, I accepted the curse as well as the gift. I allowed the heart to shape me, but I will not allow it to corrupt me. I have guarded it too long...”*

The creature was silent a long time, the eyes half lidded, her sadness weighing heavily in the air. Nea dared to ask, *“When I become the guardian,”* she began, accepting her fate even as she said it, *“Will I too become the Uktena?”* That prospect did not thrill her.

The Uktena’s head came up, eyes snapping open, an excitement creeping in. *“No. That is the beauty of you. I became an Uktena because it was within my power to become Uktena. It is not within yours. A serpent you have never been and a serpent you will never be. Not in this life.”*

At this Thomas dared to open his mouth. *“Um, but you did not chose her. You chose her aunt.”*

Bedowe sighed. *“True. I chose her aunt because she was strong willed. I was certain she could resist the heart, the call of the voices. She and her sister loved the same man. She allowed her younger sister to have him. Her heart was big, her love strong, her will great. She was willing to live alone for the love of another. Perhaps for her the sacrifice of loneliness would not be so terrible. Since she was no shaper, I knew that it could not force her form. I called to her in the Vision Quest. But she did not come. For more than a year she dreamed of me, ignored the call. Finally, as I lay dreaming, she came. It was winter, I was deep in slumber. I was aware of everything, because of the heart, but this body is not so quick to waking. She saw me and she fled, believing her fate to be devoured or become. And because she fled I could not stop the loss. It is the curse of the beast.”*

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The great head sank lower. *“I felt the tendrils of death leave me, screaming like arrows through the air, first through her heart to learn their targets, then... onward to steal those lives.”*

Nea’s voice was barely a whisper. *“So she never loved me.”*

Thomas put his hand on her shoulder, pulled her back against him.

“Not true. The bright eyed spirit turned my head, showed me the targets, before the arrows struck. A man and a woman in a metal waggon that moved without horses. And in the back a child strapped to a backboard. I was a mother. I did not want to kill a child. So to protect you from my heart, I chose you in her stead. My mark broke the arrow of death. Though I knew as I did so there would be a price to be paid, and that I was not the one who would pay it. What happened to your aunt after was her own doing, not mine. Her grief was understandable. Seeing you marked in her stead... perhaps she feared the pain of losing you eventually. Perhaps she felt guilt that you would eventually fall to the fate she herself had rejected. Perhaps she made herself not love anyone, so she would not be the result of another death. Misguided, but well meaning. Tell her it is safe for her to love. Once the penalty is paid it is paid. And it is not your life I am after. Though there is a reason children are never chosen, never marked,” she added, looking down at a speck on her coils, flicked it away with the tip of her tail. *“And for that I ask your forgiveness, but I thought it worth your life.”*

Nea frowned. *“What do you mean?”*

“You mean all this that happened this year, with Jonah, is your fault?” Thomas asked.

Bedowe actually chuckled. *“No, child. That was his doing. Though it was your own power, compounded by the mark I placed on you that drew him. Draws him still. No, it is not this for which I seek forgiveness. That is for other spirits if they think they need to,”* she glanced over at Thomas and seemed to smile. *“Though I think things turned out nicely.”* Nea blushed, glanced sideways at him. She felt the creature’s sweet breath on her face and looked up, found herself once more gazing into the great moon-like eyes. *“Tell me what happens when you sleep.”*

Nea shuddered. *“Terrible things. I dream of Galunlati.”*

Bedowe shook her head, pulled back, rested her head on the uppermost coil. *“No. They are not dreams. There is a reason children are never chosen, never marked, that we come in vision quest. You are visited by the Maji, and the creatures of Galunlati. You see, when I changed they saw a chance. They want their Uktena back. But I am not their Uktena, nor will I ever be. They thought... perhaps... if*

they could corrupt you young, that when you came to me, took your place here, that you would become their Uktena and once more wreak havoc, perhaps even rage against these white men that disturb their homes and neither respect nor fear them. When the elders realized what was happening, that these were not the normal night terrors of a child's imagination, they bound the niijii to you."

Nea remembered the things that swarmed her in Jonah's basement. Remembered what they really looked like and shivered. She had seen them as an infant, and suppressed the memory.

"But for now you have other things to worry about."

"Such as?" Thomas asked, wrapping his good arm around her protectively.

The creature chuckled again. "*Such as Life. You have dreams and aspirations and I admire you for them. You are welcome to them. Suck the mallow of life and revel in its joys and sorrows. You will know when the time comes to return to me. When the bright eyed spirit called my attention to you, he knew what he was doing...*" She turned her gaze to Thomas. "*You, young man, were an unseen blessing. Like catching a wild mare and finding a foal in her belly. I could not have seen you if I wanted to. But He sees all, through his own gifts even. Only one who could resist my curse could come to me safely. Only someone untouchable by magic could guard me without falling prey.*" The excitement returned and though she did not move, her eyes glittered. "*Oh, you are a white buffalo calf, indeed. The maji cannot touch her, the heart cannot change her, even if it could force her to become. The voices will not plague her. And you have already walked through fire for her.*" The eyes watched them for a minute, seemed to be trying to stare deep into their souls. "*You love her.*"

"I do," he answered without thinking about it.

"*You plan to take her for wife and keep her, to live with her people as one of them?*"

"*I do. Perhaps I will even learn the secrets of my own magic here, now that I know it is magic,*" he added.

"*And when her time comes, and I call, will you come with her? Keep the heart alongside her and the loneliness of ages at bay?*"

This he was unsure of. Not because he did not want to, but because he was uncertain if he would live long enough to be of use. If the heart extended her life, how could it extend his? If magic could not be acted on him.

"*So long as I still live.*"

She gave a knowing laugh, eased a little closer, raised her head a metre or so

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above them. Her voice echoed ominously within the cavern. *“Then I charge you with this. Never to spend a night from her side ...more than three running, lest the heart begin to whisper. Where you are not, the cat must be. If her life is lost before I call, it is you I will hold to the accounting in her place.”*

They stood, bowed their heads. Thomas held her close. *“Yes, grandmother,”* he said, resisting the urge to grin. The eyes narrowed, but there was amusement behind them.

“Go. Let me sleep. Though feel free to visit. I see no reason for isolation and fear. Well... in my current case understandable, but the people need not fear you, or me if you are with them. I would like much one day to speak with this Yellowbuck. ... Oh, and tell the old man that you are blessed and bound. Your union is made.... So say I,” she sniffed, tipping her nose up imperiously. Then she dipped her head and winked at them, nodding towards the door, her tail tip nudging them. *“Now go, I am old beyond ages and I have not the stamina I used to.”*

Obediently, they found the angled crevice and followed the sound of the water until it faded away below them, plunging beyond hearing. Nea shifted into a bat and sat on his shoulder, testing the path with her voice and guiding him with small tugs and pushes on his ear like guiding a horse. Before long, light from the entrance was enough to guide them and she returned to human form.

When they finally emerged from the mine, the sun was nearly at its zenith and the light was blinding. The gem’s light had been brilliant, but in a different way. The gem’s light had seemed to pierce through them. The sun merely surrounded them. The warm air on the mountainside felt almost cold after the steamy heat of the cavern.

Thomas slipped his arm around Nea’s waist and they stepped to the edge of the peak, just around from the mine opening. Blue sky stretched out before them hanging over a spectacular view of the valley. The mountainside dropped away sharply for several hundred feet, the slope barely dressed in scrub oak and hardy pine liberally decorated with sharp boulders. Nea sighed, snuggling against Thomas’s side. *“Breathtaking.”*

He chuckled, set his cheek on the top of her head as they watched a distant hawk or eagle riding the thermals over the valley. *“Life is good.”*

Behind them came the ominous click of a pistol being cocked. *“I’ll make sure they carve that on your tombstone.”*

They whirled, Thomas shifting Nea behind him. Jonah stood at the edge of the treeline a few metres from the mine entrance holding a semi-automatic on them. He

looked only a little worse for wear. His hair was windblown and his clothing bore the inevitable signs of having climbed the mountain the hard way, off the relatively clear trail they had used. But on the whole, he should have been much more dishevelled than he was. It made them nervous, perhaps more so than the mundane nature of the weapon trained on them.

Jonah noticed Thomas eyeing the weapon and chuckled. “Ah yes, I’ve figured out about your little ability. That you’re a nullifier. It’s a bit crude, not as messy as a shotgun, I know, but have you tried getting one through airport security these days?”

Facts began ticking through Thomas’s mind rapidly. If every law enforcement agency in three provinces was looking for him, how had he waltzed into an airport without being stopped? Probably the same way he got his professor to see him taking an exam when he was kidnapping Nea. He was more powerful than before. As he concentrated, he thought he could almost feel something battering the air around him, like a war axe hammering down on a shield. He would have to outwit him somehow, use his strength and arrogance against him.

The foremost thought on Nea’s mind was to protect the Uktena. She had to keep Jonah from questioning their presence here, from entering the mine. There was nothing she could think of to do unless she got close enough to Jonah to become a bear and maul him if his magic did not stop her first. And he would not be stupid enough to allow Thomas near enough to negate him. She began to wonder if a small pistol like that could do any real damage to a bear.

Jonah was sizing them up. He frowned at Nea’s human form, tried to decide if Thomas could have caused the curse to break. He didn’t think so. The last time he had been able to look in on her he had watched it in effect. No, they had found some way of managing it.

Thomas whispered under his breath, “*Nea, take flight. I’ll deal with this snake.*”

In answer, she clung tighter to him. “*Not on your life.*”

“Tut tut, such manners,” Jonah frowned. “Speaking in a foreign tongue in front of others.”

“Oh, and laying a curse on someone that could get them killed is polite?” Nea snarled.

He chuckled. “Oh, if you played your cards right, it wouldn’t have killed you. Tell me, how *did* you break it? From what I understand of ancient curses, only the mage who cast it can break it unless it runs its course, and I do not remember inserting a means to break it. I am no fairy tale witch to be that foolish,” he sneered,

shooting a glance at Thomas, mocking his hobby.

Thomas's mind raced. Jonah had no respect for fairy tales or legends, which meant he would not have read many. Mental tumblers began to fall into place rapidly, grinding his thought process to a sudden stop with a brilliant, though dangerous idea. "It helps to find something of greater power than the casting 'witch'," he said.

Nea's hands tightened on him. "What are you doing?" she whispered in fear.

He gave her a subtle pat where his good hand was behind her, around her waist, begging her to trust him.

Jonah's eyes darted from one to the other. He snorted. "There *is* no greater power. Not on this continent. Not any more."

Thomas actually chuckled, turned his head away from him for a second, looking at the ground in laughing disbelief before looking back up at Jonah through a wild fringe of hair. "Are you telling me you can't *feel* it?" Jonah took a firmer grip on the gun as Thomas let go of Nea and flung his arm out to encompass the peak. "The raw power up here? Even *I* can sense... something."

Jonah had to grudgingly admit that there was something else which had drawn him to this peak, other than his targets, which had not been easy to locate. When he had reached the base of this mountain, he had no idea how he would begin to search the village, not with all the magical signatures he could sense there. But then he had felt the pulse from up here and decided if she went anywhere it would have been to the greatest source of power. He had never expected it to be able to break the curse. If it was, he had another victim for his crucible. "So, you have a shaman of great power up here?" he laughed, trying to keep disbelief in his voice.

Thomas laughed. "Did I say there was *someone* up here?"

Nea could not keep her silence. She could not believe Thomas would put the Uktena at risk. They had no idea if she was strong enough to overcome the incredible magicks he could bring to bear. "Thomas, no, you can't!" she exclaimed, grabbing his arm. She slipped around in front of him, turning her back on Jonah. "The tribe's protection!"

He sighed, slipped his hand through her hair and looked deep into her eyes. "*Trust me, my heart. But not too much...*"

"Damn it, I said English!" Jonah snapped. They glanced around, saw the gun trained at Thomas's head.

Thomas shrugged, turned Nea's chin to look at him again. "And if I don't tell him about the wishing stone, he's going to kill us. Or just me and perform

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unspeakable things on you. Do you want that? Do you think the tribe places a greater price on a stupid chunk of silver they haven't used in centuries over their Speaker? The first True Shaper in four generations?" he asked.

She narrowed her eyes at him, wondering where he had gotten that four generations garbage. She had to assume he had a plan and was thinking on the fly. But she knew something about Jonah. If it was too easy, he wouldn't trust it. She had learned her lesson in that basement well. "And what is to stop him from killing us anyway when he has it? From wishing you dead and me his willing slave?" she snapped.

Thomas wanted to smile, forced himself not to. And he had thought it wasn't possible to love her more. "Good point." He pulled her to his chest, glared over at Jonah. "I tell you no more until you make me an oath."

Jonah actually laughed. "Why should I? I have the upper hand. Whatever is hidden in that cave I will eventually find. With or without you."

"See," Nea snapped, popping Thomas's good shoulder, but when she glared over hers at Jonah she had the ghost of a smile on her face.

"What aren't you telling me?" Jonah growled. Nea's smile faded, her mouth falling open. He smirked at her. "You are an open book to me, animal girl."

Thomas sighed. "It's simple. Hidden deep in that mine is a boulder. On it is a vein of silver in the shape of a rose..."

"Thomas, please, don't," she whimpered, struggled weakly to get him to stop.

He ignored her. "That is the wishing stone. An artifact of incredible and ancient power. The reason you will make the oath I require of you before entering that shaft is that while you may easily track the power to its source... without the proper spells, the proper chants, you will never *reach* it. There are obstacles and not all of a magical nature. Without the chant we were taught, even I would never have made it."

Jonah's eyes narrowed. "And you will teach me this chant in exchange for this oath?" Thomas nodded. "Let me guess, I leave the two of you alone? Give up my claim on her?"

"With what's in that mine, you won't need her."

Nea hissed under her breath at Thomas, knowing that Jonah would hear her. "With that stone he could hunt down every mystical source of power in the world. If he remembers the Crucible there will be no..."

Thomas put his hand over her mouth. "Let him think up his own evil plans, please?" He frowned at her, but his eyes were smiling.

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An idea occurred to Jonah. “And what is to keep you from lying to me about the way in?”

“Because I will take an oath to tell you the proper chant.”

Jonah smiled, waved the gun in a shrug. “Sorry. Not convinced.”

“There is a power here on this mountain. Part of what makes the peak sacred. Any oath or promise made here... however minor, however phrased, is magically enforced.”

“When no magic will affect you? I’m not an idiot, Hard-luck,” he snarled.

“The magic works on the words, even through my shields. It is more powerful than that which protects me. Break any word made here and you lose that which you love most. I’ll not risk Nea’s life. How about you? Who will you be putting at risk?”

Jonah chuckled. “No one.”

Nea shook Thomas’s hand off. “Ah, if you love yourself best it is your life at stake,” she taunted. “The magic here is powerful. More powerful than Thomas’s resistance, more powerful than your master, more powerful than the wishing stone. It will enforce the oath no matter how powerful you become. It’s like a curse that way.”

Jonah’s mind lit up. The stone had broken his curse. Perhaps it too could break the bonds of the oath on him, if after possessing it he even wanted her any more. He decided it was well worth the risk. “What oath?”

Thomas sighed, closed his eyes a moment. Prayed that what he had just said was not true, though he was sure Nea would have truly stopped him if it were. Then he opened them again and spoke in a steady, purposeful voice. “I, Thomas Harlan, solemnly swear to teach Jonah Jacobi the proper and correct incantations to get him safely to the wishing stone if he in turn swears that he will never trouble myself nor my wife again.”

Jonah’s eyebrow went up at the word ‘wife’. “Move fast, don’t you, Hard-luck.”

“Swear it, Jack-ass-obi,” Thomas growled.

“Fine. I, Jonah Cassius Jacobi, Esquire, do solemnly swear to never trouble Thomas Harlan or his *wife* again in exchange for the proper incantations, etc. Good enough?”

“Fine. You can put that peashooter away now.”

With a grin and a shrug, Jonah stuck it into the waistband of his pants. “Now teach.”

Thomas led Nea away from the edge of the mountain, found themselves a

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perch on a pile of rubble. “Take a light and watch your step. If you chant the following in a soft, singsong tone the whole way down, none of the traps or pitfalls will spring. If you are chanting properly, there will be two forks. You want the one that doesn’t look like a mine, more like a crack in the wall. If you’re not doing it right, you’ll never see it and every trap in the place will go off. After a while you may see light ahead. Tread quietly and keep chanting. The light is the wishing stone.”

“Chanting what?”

“*Sleep, sleep, Uktena. The medicine shield sends me as a lamb. He would me come upon you sleeping. Sleep, sleep, Uktena,*” he chanted in Ojibwe.

With a growl to cover her intense desire to laugh, Nea spun around, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Slower,” Jonah snapped, finding himself a rocky seat. “What does it mean?”

Thomas sighed. “It’s an old Ojibwe chant. It is intended to keep the spirits that guard the way asleep, so they cannot do their mischief. So treat it like a lullaby and you’ll be fine.”

“Fine, again, slower.”

It took Jonah about ten minutes to get the chant right. Another minute or two and he was repeating it flawlessly. He stood. “That right?”

Nea answered with a growl. “Yes, that’s right. Even your pronunciation is serviceable.”

Jonah stepped over to the mouth of the cave, looked back over his shoulder, grinned back at them. “Ah, farewell, sweet Rosamund. It was fun while it lasted.”

Nea made a move towards him, her fist balled. Thomas grabbed her arm, holding her back. She shrugged him off. “Don’t touch me!” she snapped, rounding on him. “I’m still mad at you.”

“I did it to protect us!” he protested.

“I’m supposed to die rather than allow what’s down there to fall into the wrong hands,” she snarled. She heard Jonah’s footsteps enter the mine, but did not turn around.

Thomas saw him conjure a ball of light in his hand and heard him begin the chant. “But honey...”

“Don’t honey me!” she shouted, then shifted to Ojibwe, continuing in the same angry tone, “*Has he gone in yet?*”

Thomas kept his tone pleading. “*Yes, but I can still see his light.*”

“*Do you really think this will work?*” She was still yelling.

“I’m hoping. It should. If she hears the message, she should be able to fall

asleep easily enough.”

She sighed, lowered her voice to a more reasonable tone. “*If you remember it was a magician that killed the first Uktena. What makes you think he can’t resist her, sleeping or awake?*”

“Because the first magician knew what he was dealing with and how to kill it. This one will be clueless.”

“*I hope you’re right.*” She sighed, sat back down beside him, nestled up against him. “Should we wait?”

“Probably best. I know bullets won’t kill her unless they are in the right spot, but I don’t know if they’ll penetrate or skitter off. If they penetrate we’ll have to pull them out.”

“You mean I’ll have to pull them out,” she smiled. “I don’t think you can manage it with one hand.”

He shrugged. “Call it practice?” he grinned.

She nudged him with her elbow then sighed and lay her head against his good shoulder, and gazed longingly out at the open sky to wait.

They did not have to wait long. Twenty minutes could not have passed when they heard shots ring out deep in the mine. Thomas and Nea quickly moved, taking cover on the side of the mine entrance, out of sight. A frenzied screaming preceded the mad scramble and a few more random shots as Jonah barrelled out of the mine, stumbling, falling, picking himself up again and firing blindly behind him.

Thomas and Nea ducked further down to protect themselves from the lead rain. Leaning against the rock they could feel the Uktena’s movement below. She was moving fast. They heard Jonah take a tumble down the path through the underbrush, his panicked cursing not even real words any more. They stood, watched where the bushes and trees rattled.

Uktena’s head appeared over them, blinked in the light. She lifted her head high, tasting the mountain air and the lingering stink of fear. She half lidded her eyes, and a laugh rumbled through her body. “*Clever trick white man,*” she chuckled. “*How did you know he would not kill me?*”

Thomas led Nea out from behind the rock, stepped closer to the ancient creature. Nea began to examine the crystalline scales for damage, though she was careful not to stray too far from Thomas. “*How could he? Besides, I was counting on you laying on this,*” he said, gently tapping the seventh white spot on her long throat.

“Big gamble.”

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He grinned. “*It wasn’t a gamble at all,*” he protested, feeling more confident about his plan now that it had worked. “*I know my enemy.*”

Nea, satisfied no harm had come to the great beast, came closer to the head. “*Not even a chip.*”

“*Bad aim,*” she rumbled, lowering her head to their level, touched her nose to Nea’s body. “*Was that the magician who cursed you?*”

“*Yes, Bedowe. It was,*” Nea sighed.

She closed her eyes fully, breathed deep. “*He will trouble you no more then. He is now white man’s problem. But he will never again be a threat to anyone.*”

“*What... what did you take from him?*” she dared.

She chuckled, a deep rumbling noise not unlike tumbling rocks deep in her throat. “*What he loved most of all. ...His power.*” With a great, groaning sigh, she began to haul her long body out of the mine shaft. “*Now it is time you two left. The old bird waits for you at the brook and I am tired. I think I shall nap in the sun for a while.*”

Nea gave the scaled coils a firm pat, smiling as she took Thomas’s hand. “*Well, don’t stay out too long.*”

“*Why not?*” she blinked.

Thomas answered, pointing to the sky. “*You might be seen up here on this bald spot. White man has learned to fly.*”

“*If you hear something, look for an insect in the sky,*” Nea replied. “*Then get inside. The last thing we need is a chopper spotting you.*”

She paused in arranging her coils to get the most out of the sun, frowned down on them. “*A chopper?*”

Thomas nodded. “*It’s actually called a helicopter, but chopper for short. It’s kind of the noise it makes... chopchopchop,*” he added, making a rough imitation of the blades cutting through the air.

“*Hmmm, I’ll keep an ear out.*”

Hand in hand, the two humans headed back down the path they had come up. It was not the way Jonah had gone crashing in his escape. In fact, they couldn’t even hear him anymore.

“*Oh, and invisible one,*” Bedowe called just as they reached the first bend. They paused, looked back. There was laughter in her voice as she said, “*...this time, take the short path down.*”

“*If I’m invisible, how did you...*” he began.

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“Just because I cannot see you, does not mean I do not know you are there,” she replied, closing her eyes and releasing a deep sigh of utter contentment.

Nea looked up at Thomas, eyebrow raised. He shook his head. “I’ll explain later,” he sighed, and began to lead her once more towards the village.



Officers Connelly and Forbst were sitting in their patrol car monitoring traffic on the highway just below the reservation. It was just on the edge of the town’s jurisdiction and a dangerous area for people to speed through. Forbst was holding a radar gun out the window while Connelly was playing solitaire on the laptop nibbling a sandwich. “Slow day,” he commented dryly.

Forbst glanced at him over her shoulder. “Literally,” she grunted. “You doin’ what I think you’re doin’?”

“Hey, I’m on my lunch,” he said defensively.

She shook her head and looked back out the window, waiting for signs of the next passing car. “Only until we get a hot one.” Her eyes wandered over the mountainside around them. She loved this part of the country. Just once, she would have liked to have gotten permission to climb the mountain on the reservation, but they gave no one that right. Something about dangerous but protected wildlife. Still, she would often glance up at that peak and wonder what the view was like. That was the part she liked best about hiking and mountain climbing, getting to the top and enjoying the view.

Something caught her eye above the stone reservation wall across the road. That something was moving fast and erratic. She reached her hand over to her partner, slapping his arm for his attention. “Dan, hand me the binoculars.”

“What? Huh?”

“Now!”

When she raised her voice, he jumped to it. She rarely raised her voice. He moved the laptop out of the way and began trying to see what had her attention through the windshield as he handed her the binoculars from the glove box. “What is it? A moose?”

She set the radar gun aside and scanned the slope until she found what had caught her eye. “No... It’s a hiker I think. And he’s running from something.”

“What?”

She searched the slope above and behind the panicked man but didn’t see

anything. Of course, that didn't mean there wasn't something. A mountain lion would be more subtle, and the tree line above his current position was much thicker. She guessed she only noticed him because he had fallen through some young saplings. It was the obvious and unnatural shuddering of the small trees that had drawn her eye. "I can't tell. But from the way he's running, it's got to either have big teeth and claws or lots of arrowheads."

"Arrowheads?" Dan frowned. "You mean like aboriginals? Don't they use guns nowadays?" he asked, reaching for the radio as she opened the car door.

"Not the Mainganoden," she explained, shaking her head. "They're very traditional. Especially here. This is sacred land to them. No guns allowed. And no hikers, either."

She stood on the side of the patrol car trying to get a better look at the man and perhaps catch sight of his pursuer, while Dan called it in. She watched the blonde head take another spill, falling into some brush over very rough looking rocks. She did not see him reemerge. "Dan, get the rifle and tell dispatch to send a paramedic. I think his luck just ran out."

Dan popped up over the roof as she unholstered her weapon and began to look both ways. "Amelia, you can't go over there. That's out of our jurisdiction and you know it. We have to call in the Mounties!"

She waited a moment for a car to pass before she answered him. "Can't wait. If he's hurt, I think they'll forgive me. If he's just trespassing, I don't think they'll mind me getting him off their property. Either way we can't just leave him there."

"And if they're the ones chasing him?" he growled.

"Then I'll let them arrest him while offering to take him off their hands. Just bring the rifle in case it's serious wildlife." And with that she darted across the street.

Connelly cursed to himself and ducked back into the car. He informed dispatch that they were going over in case rescue was necessary and asked them to inform the reservation authorities what was going on. Then he grabbed the rifle from behind the seat and made sure it was loaded. The dispatcher crackled back at him. "Connelly, if it's wildlife, shoot to scare it, not to hit it. And if you can help it, don't shoot at all. The Mainganoden have rules about gunfire on the reservation and they're anal about it, too. Meanwhile I'll call in the RCMP."

"10-4. Connelly out."

Amelia Forbst gingerly climbed the stone wall that circled the top quarter of Silver Rose Mountain. It was not a difficult task, though even as she did so, she felt

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as if something didn't want her there. The aboriginals in these parts were very adamant about their spirits and their protective powers and she had always believed there had to be something to some of it. She felt ridiculous, allowing herself to feel spooked by legends and mystic mumbo-jumbo, and fervently hoped Dan wasn't close enough to hear her as she whispered, "Ok, spirits. I'm not tryin' to trespass. I'm just getting' one out. Just let me get to him and I'll get him off your territory. Hell, I'll even bring him around to your police, let you charge him with trespass if you want. Just let me get to him." Oddly, she felt that haunted sense of trespassing ease up a bit. Though she still did not feel welcome, the hairs on the back of her neck began to stand down.

Cautiously she dropped to the ground on the far side of the wall. It was closer to the ground on this side than on the roadside as the terrain sloped sharply upward. "God, just don't let it be a mountain lion," she prayed.

She walked with her pistol held out in front of her, treating the wooded slope as if it were just another rogues alley drill. She felt as if she was being watched, but could not see anyone, not even small animals, as she cautiously approached the rock bank. "Sir, are you all right?" she called, keeping her eyes peeled for whatever had been chasing the hiker.

"Amelia!"

She jumped at Dan's voice at her hip on the hand held radio, glared behind her. He was straddling the top of the wall looking for her. "Can you see me?" she called, pulling the radio off her hip but not using it, so he could get a direction from her voice.

Dan looked her way. "Barely," the radio crackled.

She used hers now. "Can you see above me?"

"Yeah. It's a little clearer above you, but only for about twenty metres."

"Well, stay where you are and keep that thing trained up there. Let me know if you see anything."

"Cover you from the wall, got it. But you aren't going to get much of a warning."

She grinned. He had answered too quickly. He must have gotten the same creepy feeling she had. She turned her attention to the steep incline at the rock fall and the large clump of firethorn bushes, noticed a trickle of blood running down the white rock. "Sir, can you hear me? Can you move at all?"

She began to work her way around the rocks, up the less steep side to the top where she had seen him vanish. It was obvious where he had stumbled. A dark

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scuff mark on an otherwise snow white rock then fragments of cloth on the two inch long spikes. She bent down, peering in through the abundance of orange berries and dark green leaves and broken branches to the centre of the thicket where she could see something large and dark. "Sir," she called again. Getting no answer, she looked around, found a long branch and picked it up. Holding her gun in one hand and the branch in the other, she reached it into the thicket and gently prodded the dark form.

Still no response. She pushed a little harder, moving what she assumed had to be a leg. She tapped the trunk of one of the bushes, rattling the leaves and sending a hail of little berries onto the figure. Nothing darted out or hissed or moved. She concluded that it was safe to put her gun away, though she left the cross-snap undone for easy access. She sighed, eyeing the wicked thorns. She did not envy the young man at all. Her brother had once pushed her into a firethorn bush at their grandmothers when they were kids and she knew what it felt like. She had gotten off lightly. This guy.... She used the branch as a lever to open up space to reach the man. It took some doing, but she managed to shed some light on him.

He was maybe in his twenties, well built, well dressed, though the clothes had been through hell. He was face down, a bit of blood matting in the bright golden hair, one arm was dangling further in, over the short drop. As she levered a heavier bush away from him and bent to check for a pulse, he groaned and stirred.

"Don't get up," she said, in a firm but comforting voice. The man froze, the muscle beneath her hand tensing. "Relax. I'm Officer Forbst. I saw you take a nasty tumble. You're in a firethorn thicket and you're bleeding. Do you think anything is broken?" she asked.

There was a moment before he answered. She could tell by the minute movements that he was checking himself out, flexing everything in turn to make sure. There was a gasp from him as he tried to move the dangling arm. "I think my shoulder's out. I can't feel my right arm at all."

His voice was thick, a little hoarse, but somewhat oily. There was something about it she didn't like. She pushed that aside. Personal preferences had nothing to do with her responsibility for rescuing this man. "But you think you could stand?" she asked.

"Yeah. I think so," he groaned.

"All right. Wait just a moment." She stood up carefully, grabbed her radio. "Any sign of anything?" she asked.

"Not a thing. Not even the bushes rattling. Whatever it was must have given up

on him. He alive?" Connelly responded.

"Yeah, but I'm going to need your help. Get up here and find a branch or a sapling or something you can use as a lever. He's in a firethorn thicket and has at least one useless arm. It's going to take the both of us to hold the bushes off and ease him out."

"Roger that." She could tell by the growl in his voice that he wasn't too happy about having to come and help.

She chuckled, looking down at the young man who seemed much more alert at the moment. He was mumbling to himself.

It took Forbst and her partner about twenty minutes to get the young man extricated from the thicket, and another ten to help him over the wall. Once she got a good look at his face, she liked him even less. There was just something about him. He was good looking, devilishly so, or he would be cleaned up. There was a laceration over his left eye which had bled profusely but was otherwise insignificant, and other minor scratches from the firethorns. His clothes were ripped and dirty and smelled faintly of sweat and fear. He was covered in small scratches and scrapes. He leaned heavily on her as they helped him to the car to wait for the paramedics, and she did not like the look he kept giving her.

They sat him on the back seat to look him over as Connelly put the rifle away and picked up the radio, reporting in and checking on the ETA of the paramedic.

Forbst glared at him, irritated at having been left to play nurse with their first aid kit. Her main concern was to get his forehead to stop bleeding. "What's your name, kid?" she asked him, inwardly pleased when he bristled at the word 'kid'. She couldn't have been more than a few years older than him.

There was a hesitation that she caught, but wasn't 100% sure was really there. "Jack. Thompson."

"Well, Jack," she began, pressing gauze pads to his cut. "You got a nasty head wound, that's for sure."

He started to shake his head, regretted it, settled for gazing up at her as she held the gauze. "No. I don't think there's a concussion or anything. Scalp wounds bleed out of proportion."

He must have thought he was giving her admiring looks, but it was coming across as sinister, like little red riding hood being leered at by the big bad wolf. Amelia did her best not to show her distaste, tried to distract him by asking him what he was doing up on the reservation.

"Visiting my girlfriend," he answered smoothly. "We got separated up there. I

ran into ...this thing,” the man shuddered, then seemed disgusted with himself for showing his fear.

She frowned. “Thing? Like a ...sasquatch?”

“No... it wasn’t... human,” he sneered, taking offence at what he believed was a condescending tone.

Meanwhile, Dan was on the radio with dispatch relaying information for the paramedics. “Caucasian male, early twenties. Blonde, blue-eyed, 1.7 metres, roughly 80 kg. Head trauma unknown, but severe scalp lacerations.”

“Would you say his condition was green, amber or red?”

He glanced over the back seat at the young man who was obviously hitting on Amelia and chuckled. “Oh, green. Definitely green. But he’s limping so I wouldn’t call him completely ambulatory.”

There was a brief sound of someone initiating a conversation with the dispatcher. “10-6,” she said and the radio went quiet.

Amelia tried to be diplomatic. “Whatever it was you saw might not have been what you think you saw,” she began. “Some of the other aboriginals might have been playing an elaborate prank. I know some First Nations resent white men dating their women.”

He snorted, “I don’t think that’s the case here. Besides, I got a *real* good look at it. I don’t think Hollywood animatronics could have done a better job.”

Amelia looked over the roof at her partner. “Hey, Dan, you got an ETA on that paramedic? I’m running out of gauze here,” she said. Her expression clearly said ‘for gauze read patience’. The young man’s eyes were locked on her chest for a moment and she didn’t think he was memorizing her badge number.

“Hopefully not long. They dispatched them before we went over the wall.” The radio crackled for his attention and he ducked back into the car.

Amelia strained to listen over ‘Jack’s’ weak attempts at a pick-up conversation. He was trying to smooth talk her into forgetting about the ambulance, seemed to be highly annoyed that it wasn’t working.

The dispatcher’s voice seemed a little different when she came back on, stressed. “Connelly, do you have a 10-62?”

Dan frowned. A 10-62 was unauthorized listeners. He glanced through the glass partition at the young man and Amelia. She must mean him. “Affirmative,” he answered, not certain how much he could hear back there and deciding to play it safe.

The dispatcher actually sighed. He heard the heavy, drawn breath over the air waves. “You have a 10-41. 10-30 Echo Victor Alpha.”

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Dan's blood froze. Confirmed hit with another agency. A wanted man, armed and dangerous. He glanced back at Amelia, was suddenly uncomfortable with her proximity with the subject. "Negative Alpha." He was absolutely certain the man was unarmed. He thought for a second there was relief in the dispatcher's voice.

"Proceed 10-30."

'Proceed with caution?' he thought to himself. 'No, shit.' "Clarify. That a 10-44 or a 10-45?" Not that he thought it really mattered, but it might give him an indication of how desperate the man might be.

"10-44-11. The..." she gave a small cough, did not excuse herself, "rescue should be there in five minutes. Do not move the subject any further. You can never be too sure with head injuries."

"10-4. Connelly out." He stood up, leaned on the roof, one foot on the bottom frame of the patrol car. She had coughed into the mike before she said rescue. She could have meant the RCMP. They didn't have a code for 'hold subject for another agency'. When she said not to move him, she must have meant not to arrest him. Her last comment hadn't been too convincing. He met Amelia's eyes over the roof, tried to convey their situation without alerting the suspect. The dispatcher had said he was a 10-44-11. That meant he was charged with a federal crime other than sexual or robbery or the other short list of numbers they used. There wasn't much left on that list. Kidnapping maybe. He might be the type. He was certainly turning on the charm, or trying to. Could just be the list was too long to be specific. "Paramedics should be here any minute. They said to keep him calm and still. He maybe concussed."

"I do not have a concussion, I assure you," came the irritated voice from the car. He tried to stand up. Amelia set a hand on his shoulder and forced him back down. The man yelped. Amelia immediately apologized, not having realized she had just grabbed his bad shoulder. The man was ranting, cursing under his breath with the pain. She could have sworn she just heard him call her a bitch. Suddenly, she didn't feel quite so sorry.

'Jack' got himself under control quickly. "Listen. I'll be fine. I don't need a paramedic. I have a friend I can call if I can just get to a phone. I'm a med student. I know the extent of my own injuries and they are not bad, I assure you. I can even walk. I'll just see my family physician and have him relocate my shoulder, and stitch up my scalp. I'll be fine."

"That'll be up to the paramedics to decide," Amelia said firmly.

"I don't need to take up your time. Besides, I need to get back up there to make

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sure my girlfriend is safe. She'll be worried, if she's not in danger too," he wheedled, his teeth clenched. "Which she probably is," he began, his voice rising slightly as if the danger had suddenly occurred to him. "If it stopped chasing me, that means it must have gone back for her," he grabbed Amelia's wrist in an apparent panic. "You have to rescue her. She was straight up, more or less, the way I came down."

Amelia noted something in his eyes, a growing desperation, something dangerous. She casually slipped her hand free, turned her gun hip away from him, leaned the other against the side panel of the car as if she were merely getting more comfortable. "If we can't see her from here, we haven't the authority to go looking. We were breaking rules just rescuing you."

"Don't worry, Mr. Thompson," Connelly began. "As soon as the paramedics get here we have to leave anyway." He glanced meaningfully at his partner.

"Oh?" she asked him, eyebrow raised.

"Dispatch has a 10-44-11 for us to check out," he said, making a gesture to indicate the subject with his hands out of sight on the roof.

'Jack' became still, cradling his arm. "What is a 10-44-11?"

"Robbery," Connelly deadpanned. "Silent house alarm. Nobody home, so we don't have to take off immediately, but the second we're done here..." he lied smoothly.

Forbst looked at him, suspicions confirmed, but she made no indication of it. She nodded. "Let's hope they hurry up then."

They did not have to wait long. Within minutes they began to hear the wail of the Fire and Rescue echoing off the mountainside. When it came into view Amelia's heart sank. There was no sign of the RCMP. But when the van pulled onto the shoulder of the road, she could have sworn she heard the crunching of more than the van's tires on the gravel.

The paramedic opened his door, but did not immediately get out of the vehicle. Amelia kept her eyes on the suspect, watching his shoulders for the tiniest hint of movement. She was not disappointed. He started to make a move, his shoulders tensing a fraction of a second before, like a snake coiling to strike. She smoothly pulled her gun on him. "I don't think so, Mr. Thompson. I think you should sit back down and allow the nice gentlemen to look you over."

The young man must have snapped, gone stark raving. His face turned an unpleasant shade of purple and he began cursing unintelligibly as she slowly backed away to allow the RCMP officers access to him.

"*Askath! Agonare!*" he yelled. He tried something else that sounded like

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Russian or Latin.

“Watch his right shoulder. It may be dislocated,” Amelia advised them, keeping her gun on the young man as the RCMP officer on her immediate left pulled out his handcuffs.

“We’ll be careful,” he said, then smiled at the suspect. “Now, we know who you are, Mr. Jacobi,” he warned. “We would like to allow you the medical attention you need, but we are going to need to take certain precautions first. Now, cooperate and there will be as little pain as we can manage. Resist and we *will* use force, and I am afraid I cannot guarantee gentle handling on that arm of yours.”

Jacobi was all but foaming at the mouth, chanting and cursing in half-baked syllables, growing more livid with each useless word. He tried to resist the handcuffs being placed on him, but as the officer pulled him out of the patrol car, he wrenched his shoulder and went to his knees. They carried him to the rear of the ambulance, ran a thorough assessment of him. With the exception of the dislocated shoulder and maybe his head, none of his injuries were serious. One of the RCMP stayed with him as they strapped him into the ambulance and drove off.

The remaining officer approached Connelly and Forbst, shook their hands. “Good work,” he said. “We’ve been hunting him across three provinces. We only *just* got a call from the reservation that he was on the mountainside somewhere.”

“So there was no girlfriend?” Amelia asked, began putting the first aid kit away. He frowned and she relayed to him the story he had spun her.

He laughed. “Not one that wanted him. He kidnapped a Mainganoden girl back in Alberta. Apparently he followed her home,” he nodded towards the mountain.

EPILOGUE

But, Speaker, whined the large Labrador retriever, *it tastes so goood. And I just have to chew on something*

Nea sighed, running her hands along the animal's side, checking the stitches on his belly before reapplying the dressing. *No. It's not good for you. Not to mention, if you eat too many shoes they're going to find a new home for you.* The animal lifted his head up from the table sharply, fear in his eyes. She scratched his chest. *Just be more careful with the boy. He's just a puppy. You're stronger than he is. It's your job to take care of him.*

His eyes widened. *It is?*

She laughed. *Yes. Just remember he plays different games and your teeth scare him, hurt him.*

All right. I think I can do that, he panted, started to scratch at the bandaging on his tummy.

She caught the foot. *And no scratching.*

But it itches, he whined.

But eet eeetches, mocked a Chihuahua in the cage behind them. The poor little thing had a large plastic collar on him to keep him from chewing on his own stitches. *Look at me, mang,* he yapped. *Joo wan' one o' dese? I ain't wearin' it for a fashion statement!*

Nea tried not to laugh. *Quiet, Chico,* she said gently, turned back to the Lab. *All right, Benny. You can go home now. But try to be more careful around the boy. Listen when they talk to you. And no more shoestrings,* she added, bending down to him. The dog licked her nose sheepishly.

All right. No more spaghetti, he sighed.

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“Henry,” she called, smiled as he popped his head in from the next room. “Would you get Benny down for me?”

“All done?” he asked, coming into the back room.

Nea leaned back, pressing her hand to the small of her back, massaging a sore spot. The weight of her own belly was getting uncomfortable. “Yes. His family is in the waiting room.”

Henry easily lifted the large animal off the table and set him on the floor, took his leash from the doctor and led the way to the waiting room. The dog’s tail began to wag immediately when he saw the tow-headed eight year old waiting for him. He started to greet him enthusiastically, to paw and mouth him in his excitement but Sooneawa cut him off with a word. “Benny,” she warned. He stopped, his tail down, looked over his shoulder at her. “Puppy,” she reminded him, pointing at the boy. “Be gentle.”

Benny took the hint and began licking the boy instead. His mother gaped at the pair. “My word, what did you do to him?” she gasped.

Nea laughed, thanked Henry as he went back into the work rooms. “Nothing much. You have to remember he’s still a pup himself. If he starts to get too rough just snap his name and then calmly tell him to ‘be gentle’. He just needs reminding that Caleb is just a puppy himself. And Caleb, if he’s playing too rough, whine or yelp like a hurt puppy. That should give him the hint.”

“I don’t know how to thank you. We... we only came cause of the... the blockage,” she gushed as her husband took care of the bill with the receptionist.

Nea nodded. “Anything to keep them happy. By the way, if you provide him with some rawhide and maybe one of those indestructible rubber toys, he might stop eating shoes. That and you could try spraying the boy’s sneakers with bitter apple,” she chuckled. She sucked wind for a second, pressing a hand to the underside of her swollen belly, pushed back on the little foot.

“You ok, Doc?” the mother asked.

Nea smiled. “Fine, baby’s a little restless. That’s all. Time for afternoon gymnastics,” she laughed.

The lady laughed ruefully. “Oh how well I remember. Do I need to do anything special with the dressing? Antibiotic ointment?” she frowned, dreading the extra expense.

Nea shook her head. “Actually, Nancy has antibiotic tablets for him all ready. You don’t need any fancy creams. Just a little honey. Leave the bandage on a day or two. Then wash it carefully, spread a little honey on it. That’s the best antibiotic in

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the world, and you don't have to worry about him licking it off."

The mother seemed surprised but pleased. "How long do I have to keep him out of the lake?"

"Just swing by at the beginning of next week and we'll pull the stitches. I won't even charge a visit," she smiled. "He'll be able to go in two days after that." She looked around the woman to her son who was on the floor, laughing with the dog. "And Caleb," she added. "No more spaghetti."

The boy pouted, but nodded. His mother frowned, not understanding it at all. Then her husband came over, collected the leash and thanked her before leading his family out the door.

Nancy looked around the office window. "Hey, Doc?" she asked.

Nea crossed to her. "Yes?"

"Phone," she said, handing her the receiver.

There was no one else in the waiting room at the moment, so she went ahead and accepted the call there. "Hello?"

"How are you?" It was Julia.

Nea laughed. "I'm fine. Baby's a little restless, but otherwise fine. I'll call you... *someone* will call you," she corrected, "as soon as anything happens."

"I know," she chuckled. She was breathless with excitement. "And as soon as they do, we'll be there on the next flight."

"We?" Nea asked, with a raised eyebrow.

Julia couldn't hold it in any longer. "Me an' William. He proposed!" she squealed.

"He what?" Her eyes went wide. "When?"

"Just after th' soccer game last night! He took me out t' this fancy place. I thought it was to celebrate their gettin' into the world cup an' all, but then he laid this huge rock on me and asked me right there. Gawd, I'm still gettin' all teary-eyed over it."

"I am so happy for you."

Julia took a deep breath, sobered up. "Thanks. Listen, there's somethin' I gotta get off my chest. Somethin' Billy an' I talked about a long time ago. I never tole you or Hecuba or Thomas cause I liked him so much, and it didn't seem necessary, but... now that he's proposed it's eatin' him up inside. You know how Jonah found out about where you'd be an' all?"

Something uncomfortable stirred in Nea's belly. "Yes," she said slowly.

"Well... he was paying William for the information," she said, continued quickly in her fiancé's defence. "He still doesn't understand why. He didn't see

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anything wrong with it at the time. Thought he was helpin' a fellow lovebird out, he guessed. He said it was like he never saw Thomas in the picture at all. He felt real bad about it as soon as he found out, and it was eatin' at him until they got you back an' all, once he realized what he was doing. I honestly believe he was charmed like everybody else. He said he only did it so he could take me to really nice places."

"Does he know it was magic that made him do it?" she asked, not caring if Nancy overheard. Nancy was a Mainganoden's half sister and knew all about the incident.

"No. An' I think I'll keep it that way. Magic ain't a big part o' our lives like yours. He's happier as a mundane," she laughed.

"Well," Nea answered, searching her own feelings on the matter. She could not blame the charmed. Not without being a hypocrite. "I'm ok with it as long as he treats you good. As long as you're happy. And you can tell him I said that."

The joy returned to Julia's voice. "Cool! I'll see you sometime in the next couple weeks I expect then?"

"Most likely," she laughed.

"Listen, I have to go. I gotta call my mamma and then Hecuba. You take care o' yourself, ya hear? Tell everyone I said hello."

Nea chuckled, sighed happily as she said goodbye and hung up the phone. She went back into the main work room shaking her head. Henry was there helping Newin, who was her official assistant, to refill the food bins from the heavy sacks.

"Emergency appointment?" he asked, nodding towards the office as Newin sliced open another bag of food.

"No," she grinned. "Julia."

He sighed. "She bugging you about why you haven't called to tell her you've had the baby?"

"No. To tell me William finally proposed."

His head came up. He stared for a moment, then rolled his eyes. "About damned time," he said and hefted the fifty pound bag of dog food while Newin helped him to manoeuvre it into the bin.

Nea found herself a chair and sat down, watched them work. "Have I thanked you lately?" she asked suddenly.

He looked up, confused. "For what?"

"Volunteering to help me out around here. You didn't have to you know."

He grinned, folded up the empty bag and put it in the trash, dusted his hands off. He shrugged. "What else was I going to do? I'm not like Hec to sit around

waiting for you to pop. And there's only so many photographs a man can take of one mountainside in one month."

"Still," she began, took another deep breath. "I do appreciate it."

A pair of large, furry paws set themselves on her knee. Gaganan pressed his head against the side of her belly and purred. *Getting restless,* he said.

"How can you tell?" she asked.

I can see it moving from across the room. HEY! he growled, as the baby kicked him. He lightly butted back.

Newin laughed. "Careful, Gaganan," he taunted. "That's a fight you can't win. Besides, I think mamma might object to the game."

"No kidding," she grunted.

He stopped laughing, watched the cat sniffing, his ears back. Nea wasn't paying attention. She was leaning her head back against the wall with her eyes closed, trying to find a way to relieve the ache in her back.

"Gaganan?" Newin asked, even though he knew the cat couldn't answer him. "Something wrong?"

The animal looked at him and Henry, his mouth open, nose wrinkled, flehming the air.

Nea, he growled.

What?

You might want to send Maka to go get Mashkiki.

She opened her eyes, looked down at him with a frown. "Go get Thomas? Why?" she asked, then gasped as a spasm of white hot pain shot through her lower belly. "AH!"

Both men were next to her in a second. Even Nancy popped her head out of the office. "Was that a contraction?" she asked suspiciously.

"Yes," Nea gasped. "But... It's nothing to worry about. It's not my first, and it won't be my last," she snapped, finally getting the pain under control. "They're not close enough together, so back off." The last few weeks as she approached her due date, they had been getting far too 'helpful' and over-concerned for her.

"That's what you said this morning," Henry growled. "Hecuba'd have my head if I let..."

"...anything happen to me, yeah, I've heard," she said, cutting him off. "You're off the hook." She felt bad about snapping, but lately she'd been running out of patience on the subject.

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From one of the cages to her right, she heard the Chihuahua mumble, *Aiyaiyai!*

Gaganan sneezed. *You might want to rethink that,* he said, taking his feet down and backing away. *Clean up on aisle seven,* he grinned sarcastically and began to lick his paws.

Nea felt the warm wet beginning to soak her seat just as he said that and glared at him. She groaned. “Ok, so this is not a drill. Nancy, call my three o’clock and reschedule. Newin, open the paddock. Henry...”

“...Get the truck, I’m on it,” he finished for her, darting into the office to grab his keys off the hook.

Nea struggled to her feet, avoiding the mess she had just made on the floor. Nancy grabbed her arm to steady her.

“Don’t you worry about that, Doc. I’ll get it,” she said, began helping her to the side door which the men had left open in their hurry. Nea hoped she had at least a few minutes before the next spasm hit, hobbled as fast as she could towards the door.

Outside, Maka pranced at the paddock rail, tossing his head at all the sudden activity. He had grown up into a fine stallion and loved showing off. *We going home?*

No, she answered, reaching out to stroke his nose. *Foal’s coming. I need you to go get Mashkikiwakwaan. Bring him home.*

His ears went forward, and he stamped his foot. *I’ll bring him like the wind!*

Newin had just gotten the back paddock gate open when the stallion charged through it and into the woods behind the vet practice. His hoof beats vanished swiftly up the trail that led down from the reservation. It was only a quarter kilometre to the new gate there, and low enough he could jump it easily. Before Nea had gotten too big to ride to work, she and Maka had used that trail regularly.

Henry was on his cell phone as he pulled the truck up to the back door and jumped out of it. “Yes, Becca! Now! Water broke. I’m putting her in the car now. ... No need, she sent the horse for him. Just let the others know and be ready to do that witchy thing you do.”

Nea let him help her into the front of the truck. Gaganan made himself comfortable on the seat beside her. As Henry was going back to the driver’s side and Newin was slinging himself into the bed of the truck, Nea noticed a bluebird perched on the eaves of the hospital watching them with interest. It chattered something she did not quite understand and flew off. Nea was certain she knew

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where he was going, and who he was reporting to. She sighed as she snapped her seat belt into place, and grabbed hold of the leather handle above the door, bracing herself for the ride up the main road.



Thomas was in a secluded clearing just south of the village with Elk Whistle. He was bare-chested, seated cross-legged on a blanket, and surrounded by smoking sage with the old man sitting across from him. They had cut Thomas's palm with a dagger, a thin, shallow cut, less troublesome than a paper-cut. Elk Whistle was trying to heal it, and Thomas was trying very hard to let him.

It required all his concentration to sense the power of the man in front of him, to encompass him inside the shield without cutting himself off from him. Just being able to feel him had taken them months of meditation and practice. Now he was trying to learn the secret of letting some magic affect another. It was like trying to hold a heavy, cotton cloud back; like someone had knocked out the tent poles and he was trying to hold the hides up enough to sew a button on a turtle shell. They almost had it. He could feel heat from the old man's hand, the cut beginning to itch.

Then their quiet peace was violently shattered as a black Medicine Hat stallion charged into the clearing and skidded to a halt beside them. In his haste and excitement, Maka knocked over one of the sage bowls. Elk Whistle hurried to brush the embers off his blanket. Thomas was annoyed, but jumped up grabbing the horse's forelock and backed him up, trying to calm him down.

Maka shook his head, tried to push Thomas towards his back, whickering urgently at him.

Thomas tried one more time to calm the beast. Elk Whistle sighed. "I think the lesson is over for today. He is trying to tell you something, Medicine Shield," he said pointedly.

Thomas frowned, looked down into the horse's blue eyes. "Is it Nea? Is she..." The horse interrupted him, nodding his head vigorously. He glanced back at the elder. "She's... I'm gonna... I gotta go!" he cried, grabbing a handful of mane and leaping onto the animal's bare back.

Elk Whistle laughed as he gathered up his incense bowls and shook out his blanket, watched the two of them charging up the path back to the village.

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Maka did not spare the turf. Thomas was very glad he had been taking bare-back lessons. Granted, none of them had been sans-reins, but he realized he wasn't driving anyway. All he had to do was hang on. Both of them were gleaming with sweat when he finally was forced to slow down or run people over. The tribe was slowly starting to gather near the Medicine Lodge, some laying out picnic blankets, expecting to be there for some time. When they saw who was riding up, they moved out of his way, calling out jokes or encouragements.

Just short of the lodge door, Thomas slid off, giving the horse's neck a grateful pat. He nodded to Johnny who stepped up and slipped a lead around Maka, handing the tail end to Tamai and the two of them led him off to cool down. Thomas called his thanks and went into the lodge.

It was dark inside, compared to the bright afternoon he had just left. He stood by the door for a moment to let his eyes adjust. After a moment he could see several women kneeling in the centre of the round lodge in the dim light of several hanging lamps.

"Well, if you're coming in, at least wash up," snapped Cold Heart.

He turned around, looked, and saw an old fashioned double sink, not unlike the one in the operating room down at the animal hospital. He crossed to it and turned on the tap. He suddenly realized that he was covered in horse sweat. To play it safe, he dunked his whole head under the warm water. He splashed his chest, doing what he could to wash. There was nothing he could do about his leather pants. Finally satisfied, he grabbed a towel and dried off before entering the circle of women in the centre of the room.

He and Nea had been in here before, seen it with all the lights on. It was not a primitive facility in spite of appearances. Like the Council House, the Medicine Lodge was architecturally native, but made of modern material. Unlike the Council House, which still had an earthen floor, the Lodge floor was poured concrete.

They had Nea on a mat on the floor, half sitting up against two of the older women: Mitena, and, surprisingly enough, her aunt, Cold Heart. She held on tightly to their hands as another contraction hit. Seven Trees knelt between her knees, her hand on the top of her belly keeping track of things and Hecuba knelt at her side, guiding her through her breathing. Once the contraction was over, she leaned back against her supporters and smiled up at him.

"That was quick," she panted.

He smiled. "Yeah, well, I thought that horse of yours was going to break my neck," he chuckled. "You could have had Newin throw a bridle on him at least.

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How are you holding up?”

“Well enough. We’re being stubborn.”

Cold Heart growled at him, gesturing for him to take her place. “If you’re going to be here, you can at least make yourself useful,” she snapped. “Swap with me. My old knees can’t handle this anymore.”

Thomas quickly slid in behind her, taking her place. Daki’inde disappeared into the shadows of the lodge. Thomas didn’t mind. He’d been warned this could take many hours and that the women traded off frequently. He pressed his cheek against the side of her head, holding her hand tightly and easing her back against his body. He was certain he could sit there longer than either of the older women, didn’t mind at all. Her hair was damp already, clinging to the side of her face and he tenderly pulled back the stray tendrils that had escaped the single braided knot someone had tied it into. The silver lock gleamed brightly in the flickering light. She sighed happily.

He had thought the dim light would be a hindrance, figured that the full brightness of hospital lights would be safer for the birthing, but as he sat there, holding her through the calms and the spasms of pain, he began to realize it was more relaxing this way. There was enough light where it was needed for the midwives, but everything else just faded out of existence. He began to notice everything else in the room, besides the sights. He focused easily on her breathing, learned to tell when a contraction was coming. Just out of the way, he could hear the heavy, steady purring of Gaganan, keeping a watchful eye on the proceedings. He slowly became aware of the various individual scents in the room as well: ritual herbs being burned, sage and cedar; the fragrance of peach and primrose and a few other additives in steaming water; the smell of women and sweat and fire and blood.

Before he realized how much time had passed, Hecuba had replaced Mitena beside him and Daki’ was handing him a cup of tea to help Nea to drink, someone else handed Hecuba a cloth to wipe her brow with. Just when he was beginning to wonder if they might need to take her to a traditional hospital, Seven Trees announced that the head was crowning.

The room began to buzz with voices. The women immediately beside her began to encourage her to push, to breathe, all the things a birthing mother should do. In the darkness at the edges of the lodge, other voices began to chant prayers and singing quiet songs to guide the newborn into the world. It was an almost surreal experience for Thomas.

Then, just as suddenly as it began, it was over. The piercing cry of a child filled

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the air, mingling with the last of Nea's own scream of final effort. Nea sagged back against Thomas, breathing heavy, smiling as the baby protested the change in temperature. Seven Trees cleaned the baby off and laid it in a small blanket Daki' held out for her. The child was lain in Nea's arms by her aunt. Thomas and Nea gazed down at the mewling bundle, who had stopped crying as body heat was pressed against her. Nea looked back up at Thomas.

"She's beautiful," he smiled, shocked at how deeply moved he was by the sight of his first born.

"We are agreed then?" she whispered.

He nodded. "It's only right."

Next to her, Hecuba had tears in her eyes.

Gaganan stepped out of the shadows, sniffed the baby, who blinked and batted as the whiskers tickled her. *Blue eyes,* he purred.

Nea chuckled. *It was very likely to happen, though unlikely they will stay that way. We shall see.*

Mitena appeared beside Thomas. "It is time you take her outside, while we finish up here. You've been told what to do?"

Thomas nodded, paused to give Nea a kiss before swapping places with the older woman. Nea pressed her cheek to the baby's forehead, felt the tiny hand touch her back and nearly cried. Thomas, as he tried to stand, found that his legs had fallen asleep, had to take a few moments to shake them out. As he moved out of the way, trying to get the circulation going again, some of the women gasped and looked at the baby. He turned around so quickly he lost his balance and fell. "What? What is it?!" he cried, trying desperately to get his feet under him and working.

Daki' laughed. "Nothing, Mashkiki. Nothing at all. We just can see her now... and she is bright. A tangle," she added, glancing back at the babe. "But bright."

He calmed down.

Someone helped him up, held him steady until he could walk on his own. The woman patted his shoulder, "Now you see why we swap out."

He returned to his wife's side, accepted the child from him. The bright blue eyes turned from trying to focus on her mother to the new face, but she did not cry. He felt awkward, trying to find the best way to cradle her. Finally, he smiled, touched a finger to the small face, laughed when she grabbed it and locked her little fist around it. As he was guided to the door, he found that breaking that hold was not easy.

He stepped out into the fading light, very glad that it was late, so that the

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sudden, blinding light would not be a shock to the child's eyes. When the door opened, everyone was gathered around, stepped back to form a pathway for him. He walked the gauntlet of silent, smiling faces until it ended at a trio of folding chairs, where the chief, his brother and old Pipestone sat. The pathway closed behind him as on-lookers gathered.

Thomas inclined his head to the elders. "*Grandfather,*" he began. "*I present to you my daughter.*" He laid the child in Falling Elk's arms.

The old man's eyes danced as he accepted the baby. "*What name do you offer her?*"

Thomas took a deep breath. He knew the chief had the right to refuse the name. "Bedowe."

The crowd gasped, began to murmur. The chief tilted his head as he looked up at Thomas. "An ancient, and powerful name, Mashkiki. Are you so certain the child can bear the weight of it?"

Thomas tried not to grin, took ten steps back from the chief so that the child was out of his shield range. Eyes widened, jaws dropped among those who could see such things. The chief nodded, and Thomas started to step forward again as the chief looked down at the baby. "Then I name you..." the chief began only to be interrupted by a Raven landing in front of him.

"*I would see the child first,*" called an old voice.

The crowd parted to allow Spider Yellowbuck to hobble forward. The chief looked up at Thomas, who nodded, even though it was not his call. He remained standing out of range, to allow the old woman to do what she would.

Following the Raven's eye, she crept up to the baby, laid a hand on her. She smiled as the child immediately tried to suck on the wrinkled fingers. She stroked the dark head of hair, nodded as the Raven peered into the child's face for her. Spider said a short incantation, was answered by the Raven's caw. She stepped back, placed both hands on her gnarled stick and stared the chief down. "*I would give the child a second name.*"

The crowd went still. The chief glanced at the rest of the council. Elk Whistle just shrugged. "I just bet you would," Pipestone chuckled, and nodded at the chief. Falling Elk looked back at the old woman, sighed, and nodded.

"Wendea."



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“*You actually named the child ‘Memory?’*” Bedowe chuckled, studying the Leader game board on the stone table between her and Spider. “*A bit sure of ourselves, aren’t we?*” Bedowe moved the flat game piece a few squares with the tip of her tail, slid it around one of Spider’s then tapped it. Zoongizi obediently reached out and plucked the piece from the board.

Spider chuckled, shaking her head as she watched through the Raven’s eyes. “*You saw the child, same as I. And you have the ability to gaze ahead. You tell me.*”

“*Her future is cloudy, too many threads. I see early graves from wars and extinct diseases. I see grandchildren and prosperity. I see her as a man as well as a woman. I don’t know what I see.*”

Spider moved one of her pieces, slowly closing in on Bedowe’s ‘leader’. The game was much like the checker-board game of fox and hounds, but played on a different board, normally played with pogs. It had been Thomas’s idea to convert the game to flat pieces so the Uktena could play the game again. “*That in and of itself is your answer. Look into my future and that is what you will see. You’re just jealous cause I will get to retire in a few decades.*”

“*I will miss you when you die.*”

Spider laughed while she contemplated her next move. “*No, you won’t. The girl will be me. With a little luck, she may even be you in half a century or less.*” She made her move, pushing Bedowe’s single piece farther to the top of the board, more at risk than before.

The great serpent sighed. “*One can hope. So, the chief allowed it?*”

“*Yup.*”

“*How did the mother take it?*”

“*Well enough. A little sad, but honoured. And will you make a move already? If you can find one,*” she cackled, confident she had the great serpent.

The great moon-like eyes half closed, glaring good-naturedly at the blind old woman. “*In my own, you old bat.*”

Spider just chuckled, rest her chin on her hands on the top of her walking stick confidently. “*You’re just stalling.*”

“*Oh, really?*” The serpent’s tail promptly executed a series of moves which ended the game in her favour Spider’s jaw dropped. “*You’ve made that mistake before, husband,*” she chuckled. “*I’ll only fall for it once. If you want to beat me, Memory, you should channel someone I haven’t played before.*”

Spider just laughed, waved it off. “*Eh, too easy to do around you, to remember him. I’m just very glad I remembered how to resist you,*” she chuckled. “*Now I*

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don't have to bother the Medicine Shield about visiting just to play Leader."

The Uktena stretched her coils. *"I appreciate the company. Another game?"*

"Zoongizi, set them up," Spider crowed.

Bedowe settled down again. *"This time you be leader."*

END

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