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SWIFT, THE RIVER FLOWS

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## CHAPTER ONE

Dawn peeked, yellow and warm, through the heavy cloth covering the window of her room, and Síipuw threw the rough blanket off her to the hard-packed floor. The previous day's events would not dampen Síipuw's spirit today. *Not today, of all days*, she thought, and she leapt from her bed. Still dressed in yesterday's clothes, she stuffed her small feet into hiking moccasins, grabbed the pack from the stump of oak serving as a small table, and hurried toward the door. She paused only long enough to take a leather thong from her pack to tie her hair back, stuffing the long ponytail into her shirt. Raven-black and unadorned with feathers or flowers, it was short work keeping it neat.

Today was a rare free day, Wmíisan allowing her apprentice one per cycle as respite from chores and studies, and always the day after the full moon. Her people were Wolf Clan, so "one day to howl," as Wmíisan told her with a toothy grin, "was not too much." The old medicine woman expected Síipuw to spend the day with her friends—*Hmph*, she thought, *as if there were any*—but she would use this day as she always did... *exploring*.

“This is the day,” Síipuw said to her cornhusk doll where it lay on the mat. “Today we’ll see why the Place of the Stone Horse is forbidden.” She pulled the door covering aside and stepped into the glow of morning sun. Wind rushed past her, flinging dust and leaves from the clearing into her room, and tossing sheets of writing leaves and marking sticks to the floor. Clear jars of medicinal herbs and roots reflected splinters of light around the tiny room like a spell gone wild, and she smiled as she dropped the cloth over the doorway behind her. *I must clean and straighten up before the day is done*, she thought. Wmíisan had a habit of inspecting the room after a free day; the woman expecting work even when none was required.

While her room was part of the old woman’s wigwam, it had its own opening to the clearing. Most mornings, Wmíisan sat at the fire ring outside their doors, her tight sour face watching Síipuw’s doorway as the young girl dragged herself out. On free days, the old woman either slept in, or was already in the village proper selling her services.

The snoring from the woman’s doorway told Síipuw she was sleeping in.

*Better!* Síipuw thought with a bright smile. *This way I don’t have to give her details about my plans for the day.* The pack—filled last night with jerky, dried fruit, rope, and other necessities—hung from one shoulder. As she passed the fire ring, she took two clear containers of water hanging from the pole of hooks, paused, frowning, then also took a belt and knife. *You can never be too careful*, she remembered her father saying. It was one of the *last* things he had said to her. Still living on the other side of the Wood, he had not come for a visit since the day he gave her to Wmíisan as an apprentice.

That had been two harvests ago.

*I won’t think about that*, she frowned, then forced a smile. *Today I will do what no one*

*has done in over a hundred seasons!*

A sharp intake of air from Wmíisan's wigwam, told Síipuw she had almost tarried for too long. She turned from the fire ring, and fled in silence across the clearing to the hard black path separating the Wood from the mountainous buildings beyond.

#

Síipuw looked up and up at the Place of the Stone Horse, and her back shivered. The Stone Horse was not only a horse, but held a strange rider; a man unlike any she had seen before. Two others walked at his side, both looking like the People she had always known. There were strange symbols at the base of the marker, much like everywhere in this place. Even in the Wood, there were stone buildings with the same writing. Old John, Wmíisan told her, understood the writing, but Síipuw didn't believe that possible, even though she had never met the man. He lived far from the Wood, taking residence in one of the holy places filled with the writings of the Builders.

Behind the Stone Horse were steps leading to the huge doors and unknown dangers (*treasures?*) within. No one had entered, so the *story* was told, since the buildings first appeared. Someone *must* have, though, or the place would not be forbidden. Few of the other buildings were, and her people had explored *all* of them over the many years they had lived here.

She took a step forward, and a light flashed from her right, arrowing toward her. A pukwudgie flitted in front of her face, his life-light spinning through a series of colors. Síipuw knew he meant to stop her, the little people keeping close watch on her ever since she had become an apprentice. She wondered many times if Wmíisan had asked them to. This one she

knew, the right pair of wings smaller than the left.

“It’s okay, Wāhs’nanégan,” she brushed the pukwudgie aside with a wave, “there is nothing to fear here.” *I hope.*

She took another sliding step, and Wāhs’nanégan returned, hovering at the end of her nose. He carried a tiny blade no larger than a thorn in one hand, and he smiled as he jabbed the point into her flesh.

“Ow!” she cried, attempting to slap the little pest away, but he was too fast. She felt her nose, wiping a tiny drop of blood from the end. “Ugh,” she said in disgust, then pulled the pack from her shoulder. “Fine, we’ll do this the hard way.” She fished inside, removing a tightly wrapped cloth package. She untied the string and unfolded the cloth to reveal hard bread and a small container of honey. In her haste, she had forgotten to pack any milk, but this would do. Pinching off a piece no larger than her thumb, she spread a small amount of honey on the bread, then set it on the ground beside her. The pukwudgie brightened at the sight, his color now a glaring white, and he dove to the ground to retrieve his due.

“That should hold you for a while,” Síipuw said with a smile. Still rubbing her nose, she lifted the pack to her shoulder and walked away from Wāhs’nanégan as he dug into his treat. She passed close to the Stone Horse, an urge to touch the stone base gripping her, but she kept her hands reverently to her side. She looked up the steps, straightened her back, and climbed. The sun was still low in the sky, and light poured inside, casting strange and wonderful shadows.

She stopped at the opening, pulsating *wrongness* pressed against her, holding her a step away. The protection spell she cast on her clothing last night—one of the first Wmíisan taught her—glowed around her from the gentle assault of the building, and she breathed deep before

stepping across the threshold.

Inside, the air was cool and dank, as were many of the buildings she had visited. She sniffed, lifting her nose and flaring her nostrils. The air in this one held a third quality she could not identify. The closest she could come was *age*. That was silly, though. *All* the buildings were older than her grandmother's grandmother.

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness in stages, the light coming in from outside helping. She looked up into the darkness ahead, and her eyes grew wide as her breath caught in her throat.

*Dragons!*

In the center of the largest enclosed space she had ever seen were the bones of two dragons frozen in mortal combat. Wmíisan had told her about such things, but never having seen one, Síipuw hadn't believed her. Her breath and heart quickened as she shuffled forward. Her protection spell glowed brighter as she neared the beasts, casting its own wan light. The urge to touch them was strong, but even as the glow warded, it also *warned*. The magic of this place was more than she knew, and far more than she could handle.

"Don't touch, then," she said, her soft voice echoing around and around. "Understood." She dropped a hand she hadn't realized was already reaching. With much regret she left the two behemoths behind, each screaming a silent cry in their dance of death, and she continued her search through the forbidden place.

#

After an hour or more inside the building, Síipuw no longer felt the wary tingle at the back of her neck the way she had when entering. It was still there, but muted through constant

pressure. The glow of her protection spell had faded, but she did not know if that was because of a lessening danger, or because the spell was failing. Either way, she did not wish to spend the night there.

She had seen much since she entered the gigantic structure—most of it she did not understand—but it was clear it was the place where the Builders brought things they valued so that others could stand in their presence and share a history. It was the same with people everywhere in her experience, with their paintings, craftwork, and totems. The Builders were no different.

Síipuw sat on a flat stone in front of another animal—this one looking almost alive—surrounded by desert grass in a clear cage. It seemed to stalk a smaller creature. Neither was familiar to her. She took the pack from her shoulder to set it beside her on the stone. She opened the pack and took out a package tied in string like the one with the bread, and untied it. The jerky inside was deer, and was the last of what she had traded for the last time she had gone to the village. Next to it was a small amount of dried fish she had caught and smoked for herself.

She bit off a large piece of the jerky and chewed, listening to the sounds of the building. Mostly silent, there were still sounds to hear for those patient enough to listen. A distant squeak and squeal of mice. The wind hooting and howling through empty halls. A steady drip of water falling from a great height to splash on the stone floor. Amid all this, a clear and near-silent hum like the voice of a single small child.

Ghosts of children—*otschitschachquan*—inhabiting empty places was not unknown to her, but this did not sound like that. This was the sound of a living thing. Síipuw stood, shoving

the food—minus the jerky in her hand—back into her pack. She slung the pack over her shoulder, and felt the knife in the belt at her hip. The cold metal was more comfort than her spell, and she wrapped her hand around the hilt for reassurance. She took another bite of the jerky before searching for the sound.

She passed one open room after another, knowing what she searched for was not in any of them. In one, light spilled in from a break in the clear panels mounted high on one wall. In another, water dripped from a tree branch that had broken through the roof. A small pool had formed in the center, the water green and brackish, and the smell drove her onward before she could linger.

One doorway led to a set of stone steps, the clear tone coming from below, so she started down. Before she reached the bottom, the only light was from above and the dull illumination of her protection spell, so she took a glow wand from her pack, bent it in the middle until she heard a snap, then shook it. The wand glowed much brighter than her spell, and she held the thing in front of her with one hand and fed herself the last of the jerky with the other.

The glow wands had been a recent find of her people, and like most things in this world, had taken them a while to discover their function. One building held what seemed an endless supply of the things, and in many colors, but her clan kept the location secret. Like every other discovery, the number was finite, and no more could be made. It galled her that most of her clan used them for simple ceremony, as many of the Builders' gifts were wasted in this manner.

At the bottom of the steps, a doorway opened out into another large chamber, and across that expanse was another hall. The sound, though not louder, was clearer now, and she followed it without thinking. Her protection spell warned her of no danger, but she was wary regardless.

The air was thicker down here, a blanket of green moss covering her face. The odors were sweet, like fruit gone bad. Her footfalls were loud, and sounded clumsy, echoing from every surface.

On the far side of the chamber she stood before the opening to the hallway, listening. Cold air pulsed in and out, breathing like a large bear in winter repose. The sound did not waver, nor did it grow stronger. It was still at the edge of her hearing, and had been so since she first heard it. This was a magic with which she was not familiar, but unlike most of the building, it did not feel wrong. Síipuw stepped across the threshold, and her protection spell snapped off like blowing out a candle.

She should have been afraid. *Should* have returned to the light of day. What a girl of thirteen seasons *should* do, and what she actually *did* were often two different things, and Síipuw was no exception. She forged ahead, trusting her blade to protect her, and she drew it from the belt with her free hand. Shuffling forward, she traveled the hallway, stopping at an open room. Here again a broken pane of a window scattered the sun's rays, filtered between the branches of an overhanging tree, and filling the room with shafts of soft and shifting light. She entered, holding both the wand and her knife before her as proof against any living thing inside.

In the center of the room were several altars with clear cages on top, each holding items she—for once—recognized. Ceremonial bowls of clay or hammered copper, obsidian blades, and even pipes for smoking. Along the far wall were more of the cages and shelving, each holding similar items. None of them interesting, as she could have held items just like them in Wmíisan's home. She shook her head and turned to leave, but before she could take a step, the sound changed in pitch.

She turned back to the altars, one in particular drawing her attention. The clear pane on top had shattered, but nothing inside seemed to be missing. A collection of stone knives were laid side by side, and the arrangement suggested it was still complete. All but one was smooth except for the chipping necessary to fashion the blade, but the larger one in the center had designs carved into it she *almost* recognized. *This is the source of the sound*, she thought, passing a hand over the knife.

“What good is a stone knife?” she mused, her lip curled in a soft sneer, as she held out her own made of shiny metal the Builders provided. The stone knife, though larger than the others in the case, was still smaller than the blade in her hands. It looked to be ceremonial, possibly intended for ritual sacrifice.

*And yet...*

And yet she felt no evil from it. Items used for ceremony always took on the nature of their use. A knife used for evil *was* evil.

This one clearly was not. *Manitou* was present in everything, living or not, and once a thing’s soul was blackened, no amount of scrubbing could clean it.

The soul of this knife, as clean as anything she had known in her short life, called to her. It *begged* to be held, taken from this dark place, and she reached for it before she realized what she was doing.

*Everything costs*, she thought. *Scales must be balanced*.

With less reluctance than she thought she would feel, Sípúw lifted the stone knife from its honored resting place, leaving her metal one behind as payment.

The singing stopped.

#

A gale-force silence surrounding her like a cocoon, Sîipuw half-stumbled toward the opening to the darkened hall. As if some part of her memory excised from her mind, leaving a hole where the sound should be. She tried to remember the sound, but found she could not, and discovered she already missed it.

When she stepped into the hall, her protection spell emerged as if it had never left, asserting itself in a glow that drove back the dark. The knife in her hand must also have had an old spell, and a powerful one at that. Light bleeding from the stone was much brighter than hers, outshining her own and the glow wand. The ruddy illumination from the knife lanced ahead of her, throwing every stone, turn, and opening into stark relief.

Sîipuw paused, frowning and tilting her head at the combined light from the two spells. She took almost too long to realize the truth of what they told her. She was in danger, and for the light to be so strong, the danger was both real and very close.

She spun in place, listening for anything out of place while peering into the darkness past the reach of her light.

She heard it before she saw it. The soft pad of large paws, the hot breath of a predator stalking its prey. The low and throaty growl told her it was close, but nothing showed itself.

“You are reckless!” Wmîisan had told her often during her training, and she had been. *Still am*, Sîipuw thought. A protection spell was only good against evil magic, not a flesh and blood creature intent on killing. For that you needed a weapon. A spear or bow was best, but a good knife would do.

But she had left her *good* knife on the altar. All she had was the warm stone in her hand.

*What good is a stone knife?* she thought for the second time that morning. Why had she not brought a spear? Or even a bow and quiver? Granted, she was not good with the bow, but any fool could use a spear!

The *thing* stepped into her circle of light from a nearby room, and she almost ran at the sight. Running from a predator was always a mistake, even when you had a place to run. Down here, there was nowhere she could reach for protection before being run down, and choosing to remain still saved her. The animal was a large cat-like beast, malnourished and mangy. It prowled just outside the brightest circle of her light, never stepping inside. The eyes of the cat were rheumy, weeping white fluid at the corners, and it had a thick fluff of tan and gray fur surrounding its head. As skinny as it was, it still outweighed her by another two Sípuws, and its paws were each as large as her head.

She had never seen such a creature before, though others had. They told tales of the huge cats hunting in packs farther to the north where there were larger prey animals. A Sachem in the region wore one of the skins as his raiment of office. The animal was known as a fierce hunter, and she knew that hunger made them more dangerous.

“You don’t want me, mister cat,” she said to the creature, her voice tiny and mouse-like to her ears. “Even with only a stone knife in my hand, I will make you work too hard for your meal.”

That was all the bravery she could muster; just keeping her bowels and bladder from letting go was an effort. The animal continued to prowl outside the circle of light. Gathering all her courage, Sípuw slid a step forward, the light moving with her.

The cat shrank from the light!

Síipuw almost smiled, checking herself at the last instant. Showing teeth to a predator was an invitation to fight. Even children still on the teat knew this.

She slowed her breathing and took another step forward, and the cat moved to stay outside the circle. Another step, then another... and soon she stood at the bottom of the steps that had brought her here. The cat was between her and the steps, and if her next did not make it move out of the way, she had no other ideas. It had stopped circling, content to stand between her and escape. She had no wish to force the thing to back its way up the steps ahead of her. A single faltering step could spell her doom.

Her stomach growled, and for a brief instant she feared the noise would encourage the animal to pounce. Instead, it tilted its head, pondering the meaning the way animals sometimes do. Síipuw grinned—*without* showing her teeth—carefully dug inside her pack, and pulled out the package of the remaining jerky and fish. She waved it in front of the animal, spreading the scent, and when she was sure she had its attention, she tossed the pack of food behind her and away from the steps.

The cat leapt past her, so close it could have swiped at her with a single paw, ripping through clothing and flesh on its way. Instead, it landed on the free and easy meal, tearing the cloth off to gobble down the meager offering.

The way now clear, Síipuw breathed a heavy sigh of relief, wiped the sweat from her brow, and climbed the steps. The cat would follow her when he finished his meal, but if the light from the two spells held, she would see daylight again.

She turned to bid the cat farewell, but it and the food were gone.

The sunlight was blinding after so long in the gloom of the place, and Siipuw shaded her eyes with one hand as she stepped through the main doorway. She cast a longing glance back inside, vowing to return with the next full moon. Ahead, the trees across the path still rustled their song in the breeze, the grass beneath still green, the sky above still blue, but the world without seemed *lesser* now. Behind, she felt the pull of dark magic, taloned arms reaching from inky depths to drag her back, but she felt no fear. Magic was a tool. A knife to cut, or a needle to sew. It only became evil when *used* for evil.

*Why is this place forbidden?* she wondered. *Other than the possibility of becoming a big cat's next meal, of course,* she thought with a chuckle. She shook her head, smiling, and walked down the front steps and past the Stone Horse, and this time she *did* touch it, feeling the coarse stone and smooth metal. Outside in the strong noonday sun, her protection spell was invisible—as was the spell surrounding the stone blade—but she could feel their presence. *Especially* the blade. It had its own flavor, reminding her of the smell of the first flare of burning tobacco.

After the tension in the hallway, her *own* smell was certainly distinctive, the pits of her arms soaking the shirt through. There were places where she could wash before returning to her home, but it might be best to leave it for now. She didn't know what to make of the knife just yet, and she didn't want Wmíisan to know about it until she did. Siipuw hoped its spell was masked by the one on her clothes, and washing them clean would remove hers from them.

*Water cleanses everything,* Wmíisan taught her. *Much strong magic originates from water.*

She might wash the knife, but if that broke the spell—not a sure thing—would it also break the magic of the blade? And there *was* magic in the blade, Siipuw was sure of that.

Objects containing magic were rare, and required great power and great skill to make. Some were made by Mother Earth in the fires of her belly, and others by Gitchi Manitou as he strode across the sky. The most dangerous were those made by men, as they were unpredictable and often overpowered. *Manitou* was a part of everything, but some things could hold much more before they burst. A shaman might die finding that limit.

Wāhs'nanégan flitted down from a branch across the way, hovering in front of her face, scolding and stopping her mid-stride. It was clear the little person had been waiting for her, if not for a second helping of bread and honey. She sensed a nervous energy coming from the pukwudgie, and she smiled lopsidedly in an attempt to calm the poor thing. It was said she had an ancestor who understood the creatures' speech, but Síipuw certainly never had, nor had anyone else she knew. When it refused to calm and move away, she gently brushed it aside and continued toward the Wood.

Síipuw drank from one of her water containers, only now recognizing her thirst. The air inside the Place of the Stone Horse had been so water-heavy she had never thought to drink. The water was cool as it traveled down her throat, and she wiped her mouth dry and sealed the container, smiling at the sun. It was mid-day, and still no one ventured to this part of the Wood. None of the children she knew were brave enough to pass so close.

A small white-tail deer stood at the edge of the Wood, munching a sapling, and staring warily up at her with one eye.

“No worries, little one,” Síipuw said with a wink, her voice soft and soothing, “I am not hunting meat today.” She paused, remembering the hallway. “Keep an eye out for the big cat, little deer. You would make a good meal for him, I think.”

The deer, mollified, continued its meal, pulling the stem with a sharp tug from the ground before lifting its head to chew. It watched Síipuw enter the Wood, tracking her with its head pivoting on its long neck. Satisfied there was no danger, it bent back to the foliage.

#

“Where have you been?”

Wmíisan stood at the entrance to Síipuw’s room, arms crossed over her slender frame, her right foot tapping the hard soil.

“Out,” Síipuw said. “Today was a free day, right?” She stopped farther away from the woman than manners required—almost at the fire ring, afraid to come closer for fear the old medicine woman might smell the magic of the stone knife.

“Of course, of course,” she said, waving one hand at the wrist. “I only hoped you might have brought back a root or two. Maybe some berries for our meal.”

Síipuw hung her head in real shame. Coming home empty handed was not only rude, it was selfish. She had taken food and water with her, and brought nothing back in return. Well, not *nothing*, exactly, but nothing of value to the home. No one ventured from the home without bringing something back.

“I apologize, honored elder,” she said without lifting her head. “Would you like me to go find something?”

Wmíisan wrinkled her nose. “No, I think you should clean yourself. Your smell is frightening the rats.” The old woman laughed loud and hard at her own joke, wiping a tear from her eye. She did this at least once a day at Síipuw’s expense, whether alone or in a group. It was never nasty or mean, the way some of the children were, but Síipuw gritted her teeth biting

back a response. She knew the woman was keeping the girl in her place.

“I think you are right,” she said, holding back the rest. She took a bucket from the post where it hung, and started for the well.

“The clothes, too, while you’re at it,” the woman called out. “I fear they will reek come morning time. Probably contaminate the whole wigwam,” she added, laughing harder.

Síipuw knew her smell wasn’t *that* bad, but it was best to placate the old woman. Wmíisan kept a stripped sapling handy for those times Síipuw forgot. The woman had not struck her in many moons, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t.

She had to go to her room for fresh clothes, and passed Wmíisan along the way. The woman stopped laughing and snatched Síipuw’s arm, holding it in an eagle’s grip with her bony fingers.

“Hand it over,” she said, as calm as the morning sea.

Síipuw thought to feign confusion, but there was no point.

“Come, girl, I can feel it. It must be very strong, or I would not.” She held out her other hand, palm up.

Síipuw was a head taller than the old medicine woman, having shot up like a stalk of corn last season, but command was not about height, or weight, or how loud you could yell. It was about *respect*—how much you had, and how much you gave. Wmíisan had hers, no matter how much she wished it weren’t so.

She pulled the knife from her pack and dropped it into the medicine woman’s hand.

As soon as it touched her skin, Wmíisan let it slide away and fall to the ground. She stepped back, eyes wide, holding her shaking hand over the thing, first and last fingers out in a

defensive gesture.

She looked up at Síipuw. “Where did you get this?” she asked, breathing hard and hunched over like her belly was sour.

“I...”

“Where did you get this, girl? Tell me!”

“The Place of the Stone Horse,” she said, eyes lowered in shame and fear. “I wanted to see inside, and—”

“*Inside?*” Wmiisan shouted, and she released Síipuw’s arm as the other hand flew to her mouth. She took another step back. “You can’t! *No one* goes inside, Síipuw. It is not possible!”

*Síipuw. Not “little one”. Not “girl”. Not “clumsy oaf”.* That, more than anything, shook her. The knife was *not* evil—it couldn’t be—but the medicine woman acted as if it were. *What have I done?*

“Quickly, girl,” the woman was saying, “wrap it in cloth, the heaviest you can find. Soak the cloth in water first.” Wmíisan had calmed somewhat, but her hands still shook. “After you have done that, bring it inside to me,” she said, then turned on her heels and walked into her wigwam.

Síipuw stared after her, then shook herself and followed her instructions.

*What good is a stone knife?*

## CHAPTER TWO

Síipuw lay the wet bundle on the low table in Wmíisan's wigwam, and sat on the hard packed floor. Wmíisan knelt across from her, and unwrapped the knife using a fresh cutting from a nearby willow. She poked and prodded until the stone blade lay bare, examining the crude carvings on the exposed side. Wmíisan shook her head, *tsk tsking* and leaning in as close as she dared. Her eyes were clouding in her age.

“Bring that candle closer, please,” she said without looking up.

Síipuw reached for the stand with the candle and nearly knocked it over.

“Clumsy oaf,” Wmíisan hissed, but took the candle from her with gentle care. She bent back to examining the knife, then used the branch to turn it. The markings on the other side were much different, with an intricacy unmatched by the artisans in the village.

*I've never seen anything like those before*, Síipuw thought. None of the symbols made sense to her, but Wmíisan nodded her head like she understood them.

“Does it contain evil spirits?” Síipuw asked, her voice low and reverent, betraying the

fear she felt.

“No, foolish girl,” Wmíisan said sharply, chiding. “But it *is* very powerful.” She turned it again with the branch, pursed her lips and blew out a long breath. “This is old world—from the time before time.” She sat up straight and looked into Síipuw’s eyes. “It is possible this is the same knife Gitchi Manitou used to divide night from day when the world was new.”

Síipuw covered her mouth with her hand as she drew a sharp breath. “Really?” she said, eyes wide.

Wmíisan cackled her old-woman’s laugh, loud and hard enough to bring on a coughing fit. “Of course not, child,” she croaked between coughs. “Do you think such things are just lying around waiting for a mindless waif to find?” She folded the cloth over the knife again using the branch, then gathered the bundle in her arms. Síipuw didn’t fail to notice that the woman still refused to touch it with bare skin. “You have found a useful trinket, but it is still beyond your training.” She grinned and stood on wobbly, stick-figure legs, and took the bundle and placed it upon a shelf of other items Síipuw was forbidden to touch. “It is best if we keep this here for now.”

Síipuw wanted to argue the knife belonged to her, but she knew there was no point. Once the old hag decided, that was the way things were, regardless of the truth. Rather than begin a needless and ultimately *losing* battle of wills, she rose smoothly to her feet, bowed, and left the woman alone.

The sun was still shining, and the air still fresh, and today was *still* a free day. Síipuw tried to keep that in mind as she took a bow and quiver of arrows from the rack at the fire ring. *Maybe if I bring back a rabbit or two for evening meal, she will show some respect.* It was what

she should have done to begin with. She was still terrible with a bow, so there was always room for practice, and what better way than bringing home meat for the fire?

Síipuw knew Wmíisan watched her as she straightened her back, threw the quiver over one shoulder, and walked to the Wood. She refused to look back as she crossed into the underbrush and folded into its emerald embrace.

#

Síipuw shot no rabbits that day, but got one using a snare. She had always been good with a snare, nimble and tiny fingers able to tie delicate knots. Her father had taught her well before he dropped her on Wmíisan's doorstep.

Waiting for a rabbit to walk into a trap took patience, a skill Síipuw learned from the old woman. Silent watching left a lot of time for thinking. She crawled high in an old oak, nestling into a large crook to wait for the snare to spring.

From her vantage in the tree, she could see across the expanse of the Wood to the huge buildings beyond. The nearest held entire tribes, sometimes all four clans, each on separate floors. Most of her people lived in and around the buildings, with only a few like Wmíisan choosing to live in the clearings in the center of the Wood. When the buildings first appeared over a century ago, the Wood was much smaller, but had spread since then—both inward to the lake, and outward to the buildings. Forest lands encircling the buildings had also begun their long march to the center, tearing up entire sections of the stone paths between the structures.

It was said the Pequot once lived here and were squashed flat by the arrival of the buildings, but Síipuw didn't believe that, dismissing it as another bedtime tale for children. Although, she had never met any Pequot, and the elders said they were almost gone from the

land, so there might be *some* truth to the story. More likely was that they, along with others, perished in the battles fought over the rights to this strange new world. Her people had been peaceful for as long as she had been alive, though, so the fact they held most of the buildings made no sense. *Surely the Iroquois, Mohawk, or even Mohegan would have pushed us out by now*, she mused.

On the contrary, those tribes and hers met and traded in peace. Mahicans had become stewards of the new—exploring, discovering, divining, and trading every piece of information and trinket they pulled from the buildings. Most tribes' braves ventured no closer than the outer ring, and a vast and thriving trading compound grew up at the boundary.

Sípuw's stomach growled, reminding her she had neglected to bring any jerky, which reminded her of the big cat in the hallway. Sípuw had been frightened, but as usual her fear presented as brave bluster. This had gotten her in trouble on more than one occasion, but for once it had served her well. She still did not understand why the beast had not killed her when it leapt past.

The poor creature had been starving. She could feel the thing's hunger even without seeing the ribs poking through its hide. There was more than hunger behind its eyes, though, and she wondered what it might be.

The strong sapling tied to the snare snapped up, the rabbit squealing once like a baby as the line bounced. Sípuw watched it struggle for a second, then scrambled down from her perch. She took a small knife from her belt, and held the animal up by the line. It ground its teeth noisily, its eyes wide and manic.

"I am sorry, little one, but today *I* am the cat," she whispered, and slid the knife into the

back of the rabbit's neck. The touch of the blade aborted its cry at once, and its limbs stilled. *I wish I were better with a bow*, she thought. Killing—even for food—was simply too difficult up close. *A real cat wouldn't hesitate. It wouldn't even think about it.*

And in that moment, she understood the beast in the hallway. *It went down there to die!*

“A creature that powerful and majestic should never give up!” Sípúw could not imagine a reason for such an animal giving up on life, but she vowed to Gitchi Manitou it wouldn't happen to this one.

The stone knife forgotten in her newfound purpose, she gathered the rabbit and walked back to the wigwam to skin and clean it.

#

It was another two days before she revisited the Place of the Stone Horse, and she hoped the cat was still alive, though she feared otherwise. Wmíisan had left early for the village, planning to sell a few jars of poultice there, and had left a short list of chores for Sípúw to complete before her return. One of them included hunting for meat for the evening meal.

After Wmíisan left, Sípúw hurried through the other items on the list, careless in her haste. The old woman would not approve of her performance, but she did not care. The trip to the Stone Horse was not long, but she still had to do enough hunting for them *and* the cat. She didn't know how much meat the huge animal required, but it was more than she and Wmíisan could eat in one sitting. That meant finding and killing more than she ever had in one hunt. The people in her village would call it wasteful if they saw her with so much.

This time she took a knife belt, bow and quiver, *and* a spear. After looping the belt around her waist, throwing the bow and quiver over a shoulder, her bag over the other, and

bottles of water around her neck, she looked like a warrior going off to battle.

In one way she *was*. She was doing battle not against the Mohawk or Iroquois, but against the death wish of a living creature. “When someone wants to die,” her father had told her, “they will find a way to make it happen.” Every living thing fought death—sometimes violently—but some also fought just as hard *to* die. A wise woman got in the middle of neither. Anything wanting badly enough to die was a danger to others as well.

*I must be careful*, she thought, fully intending to be so.

“Where do you hunt today, Síipuw?”

The voice at her back stopped her mid-stride. She didn’t want to turn, but had no choice. Gattatáji stood behind her as she turned. The boy, two summers younger than her, looked up at her with wide eyes and a playful smile. Even at his age, everyone knew he was two-spirit, and he often braided flowers and feathers in his hair just to drive the point of the spear home. He would be a revered medicine man one day, but today he was just a nuisance to Síipuw.

“Nowhere *you* need to be, little flea,” she said, hoping to send him on his way before he could delay her further.

“Ah, an *adventure!*” he said, his eyes twinkling. Even though he was two-spirit, he was still a boy, and every boy loved an adventure. Where one did not exist, he often would create it—usually causing chaos and destruction in his wake.

“Not an adventure, Gattatáji. *Chores.*” Like every boy his age, chores was an evil word, conjuring sore muscles and sweat-soaked hair. The word alone was enough to send most fleeing into the Wood.

“I can help!” he said, stepping forward, and then he winked. “I am much better with a bow than you, at least.”

Síipuw sighed and rolled her eyes. “Does your mother know you have left your crib?”

“That’s funny,” he said, snorting once. “Does *your* mother know...” he began, looked into her eyes, then stopped. He looked down at his feet as one toe drew circles in the dirt.

“Sorry, Síipuw. Sometimes I forget.”

*Sometimes I do, too, she thought. But then someone will remind me.*

“It’s okay,” she said. “I never knew her, anyway.” She nodded at him to show she held no ill will. “You cannot miss what you never had.”

Gattatáji looked up, tilted his head, and pursed his lips. “That is true, I guess. You can still wish though.” The last he said looking at his feet again.

She stood there looking at the boy, wishing he were some place else, then shook her head. “Come on, little flea,” she said, chucking her chin toward the Wood and removing the bow and quiver to hold out to him. “I guess I can use the help.” He brightened, lifting his eyes to meet hers, and she added, “For *now*.”

He took the offered bow and quiver, shouldering both, and ran past her to take the lead. Fleet of foot, he crackled with unrestrained boyish enthusiasm; a never-ending supply of energy flowing from every step.

How he knew where she was going that morning, she could not say, but he carved a path through the Wood straight toward the Place of the Stone Horse.

#

They walked in silence for a time, Síipuw cataloging the plants and birds they passed.

Most big game in the area had been hunted out long ago, but an occasional deer strayed this far south. As winter grew near, more would come, but most would be taken by the hunters in the North before they got this far. Wmíisan told stories of bison covering the plains in the West, a great black sea of shaggy beasts stretching from horizon to horizon. Síipuw did not know if the stories were true, but there was a strong trade in bison meat and skins every year, the supply cheap and never-ending. Most of what there was here this time of year was squirrel, rabbit, birds, and the occasional large rat. Packs of dogs and wolves kept those populations small, though, and the result for her people was unsatisfying hunts and ever-increasing trade with the North and West.

Gattatáji stopped, shooting an arm across the path to block Síipuw, and she stopped. He turned his head, listening to the sounds of the Wood, and wrinkling his nose as he sniffed the air. With slow, deliberate motion, he took the bow from his shoulder and pulled an arrow from the quiver. He nocked the arrow on the string and drew it in a single smooth motion. The little oblong wheels at the ends turned in silence as he pulled, and the bow flexed on its joints.

The underbrush in front of them rustled a quiet sigh, and both of them held their breath as Gattatáji tracked the sound. He tilted his head, sighting along the arrow, and a small white-tail deer poked through the bushes, tugged at the leaves, and chewed.

“No!” Síipuw cried out, and grabbed Gattatáji’s shoulder just as he loosed the string. The arrow buried itself harmlessly into a nearby tree, and the deer bounded away into the brush.

“Why did you do that?” he said, lowering the bow, his face red.

“It was a doe, you idiot,” she said, shaking her head. Killing a doe wasn’t just bad luck, it was stupid. Even the youngest child knew that. Síipuw walked to the tree and worked the

arrow out of the trunk. “How could you not have seen it?” she said as the arrow came loose. She walked back to Gattatáji’s side and dropped it into the quiver. “You may be good with the bow, but you are terrible with your eyes.” She smiled at him to show no harm was done, but he frowned and stalked away, huffing and throwing the bow over his shoulder as he went.

*Sometimes he is worse than the girls in the village!* she thought. She huffed once as well, and caught herself. *I was being mean*, she admitted, and turned to follow her only real friend.

“Don’t worry, Gattatáji,” she called at his back. “There will be other chances to hunt today.”

He stopped, shoulders slumping, and he turned to face her. “Why do we go to the Place of the Stone Horse?” he asked, eyes narrowed, his brow dark and searching.

She halted two paces from him, unsure what to say. Her silence stretched too long, and he nodded at her unspoken confirmation.

“I knew it,” he said, the corners of his mouth tugging upward.

“You followed me two days ago, didn’t you?” she asked. There was no need—she already knew the answer.

“Of course,” he said. “I may not be good with my eyes, but you are much worse with your ears!” he said, laughing, and Síipuw knew her earlier sharp words were already a distant memory to the boy. “None of the others in the village are so much fun to track.” He winked at her. “You are noisy in the Wood. Did you know that?”

Frustrated at his disrespect, she shook her head and grinned back. “I know the day is running away from us, and there is much still to do,” she said, punching him in the arm. “Come

on, little flea. Let's see if there is something worth hunting along the way."

When he didn't move, she tilted her head and raised her eyebrows in silent question.

"You still didn't answer me," he said. "Why do we go to the Stone Horse?"

She sighed heavily, grabbed his shirt and pulled him after. "Come along, and the question will answer itself soon enough."

He laughed as he fell into step beside her. "A good day. Adventure *and* a mystery!"

#

By the time they reached the wide path separating the Wood from the Place of the Stone Horse, there were two rabbits, four squirrels, and two small birds in their game bag. The birds had been the most difficult, but Gattatáji really was a good shot with the bow. Siipuw feared even this would not be enough, and hoped they would have similar luck on the return trip.

The Stone Horse was not really made of stone, but it was easier to say than the Place of the Metal Horse Standing on a Stone Base. She wondered why the men of metal were left out of the name. *Probably for the same reason*, she thought. The strange man aback the horse, flanked by her people, looked always east, his hair shorn short and something covering his upper lip beneath a squat nose. There were totems much like this one everywhere among the great buildings, though many had fallen or broke apart over the years.

Siipuw hefted the game bag, judging its weight, and hoping again it would be enough. *Would the cat even eat?* The animal's soul was a broken thing, like the wing of a young bird fallen from its nest. Even now, and this far away, she felt its languid abjection. *Alive, at least*, she thought, her hope a sputtering flame. She closed her eyes, grasping at the poor creature's

heart, ladling her own hopes into the cavernous hole in its chest.

Gattatáji placed a gentle hand on her arm. “Are we going in?” he asked, the distracted fear in his voice a beacon for her attention.

“Not you, little flea,” she said, and then opened her eyes to stare into his. “I am protected by my magic, but you are not, and I don’t have the time or the ingredients to cast a spell for you.”

“I don’t need a spell!” he protested, thumping his chest with a fist. “And stop calling me little flea. My name is Gattatáji, and nothing in there is fast enough to catch me.” His chin was thrust out, nose pointing defiantly at the building, but his breathing betrayed him. He was almost as frightened as he should be. “Besides,” he said, “you can’t stop me from following you.” He finished by crossing his arms the way her father had done when the discussion was over.

*Do boys learn this, or is it in their blood?* she wondered.

“I also can’t stop you from dying,” she said, leaning so close their noses almost touched. “Why do you think we hunted for so much meat?”

His eyes grew wide, but he said nothing.

“There’s a big cat in there—bigger than your father—that needs to feed, and if he’s hungry enough, he’ll eat *you*,” she finished, poking a finger into his chest.

Gattatáji gulped once, but maintained a stoic expression. He was an imp, and a pebble in her moccasin, but he wasn’t stupid. With a slow relaxing of his shoulders under her hard glare, he at last dropped his hands to his sides and lowered his eyes.

“Fine, but next time—”

“There will be no next time,” she said with a short chop of her hand, her voice cold.

“*Next* time,” he repeated, brooking no argument, “you will cast a protection spell for me as well.” He looked up into her eyes. “Or else I won’t help you hunt.”

He had her there, and she stopped with an objection hanging from the end of her tongue. With her hunting skills, it might take days to gather enough food for the cat. Sípuw sighed, reached out with one hand to lock arms, sealing the agreement. After releasing him, she reached into the bag and removed one of the rabbits.

“Put this one in your game bag. If we get nothing else on the way back, I’ll at least have this to show Wmiisan.”

He took the rabbit from her and stuffed it into his own bag. “Maybe I’ll hunt while you are inside.”

“Don’t go far, Gattatáji. I won’t be long,” she said, then turned and left him there. *If I come out at all*, she thought.

#

Crossing the threshold was much easier this time, the building embracing her rather than pushing her away. The air was cooler than she remembered, but the musty dampness was gone. She stopped just inside the door, the energy of the place flowing through her like water through sand.

*There is no glow from my protection spell!* she thought with some alarm, holding her hands in front of her eyes. This was not an extinguishing of the glow, as when she entered the room with the stone knife, but more like the spell itself had been erased. *I’m at the door, and can leave now if I wish*, she told herself, calming her nerves. She knew the glow only showed

itself when she was threatened or danger was near, so the spell might still be active. *It might just have something to do with the fact the building is welcoming me now, instead of warning me away.*

As a test, she stepped close to the dragons of bone, and reached out with one hand. A brief spark from her spell caused her to jerk her hand back, and she smiled. “At least it’s still working,” she said, looking up at the dragon. This one had large teeth, but oddly shortened arms. “You were a carrion-eater, I think,” she said to the bones. “A predator needs strong arms, and sharp claws.” The only real predator in this place waited for her below.

She turned her back on the dragons, and walked through the cavernous chamber to the door and the steps beyond. Her moccasins made little noise as she padded across the floor, with only the sound of wind passing through the halls marring the silence. She carried the spear at her shoulder, point up for safety. The knife of silver metal bound to the end was strong and wicked-sharp. Once again, she marveled at the knowledge the Builders must have had to create such wonders. The sharpest knives her people could make were of obsidian, and were brittle. Those made of stone were only good for chopping at plants, while the copper knives blunted easily.

*I wonder if we will ever be able to accomplish the same feats as they,* she thought.

Sípuw reached the stone steps, looked down into the gloom, and pulled a glow wand from her pack. Without the glow from her spell, she would be blind, and Wmíisan still had not taught her one for illumination. She couldn’t even make fire without flint and moss.

The steps were damp and slick, but she was careful with each footfall, and at last she neared the bottom. Three steps up, she took out another glow wand, snapped it, and tossed it to

the floor ahead. Now she could see most of the hallway ahead, and she stood very still, listening for the cat. He was near, and her heart skipped a beat at the dark melancholy radiating from his mind.

Sípuw pulled a rabbit from her game bag and waited. A grunt, followed by heavy breathing, and the cat approached from the blackness beyond the circle of light from the wand. He padded into that light, first sniffing the wand, then looking up into her eyes. He seemed smaller than she remembered, though he was still larger than the greatest wolf she had ever seen. Even in the soft green glow of the wand, she could tell his coat, the color of powdered sandalwood, was patchy in places. Bare skin peeked through, some places red and scabrous. She could do nothing for that without getting close enough to touch him, and she had no intention of doing that.

She tossed the rabbit into the circle of light. “I know you would rather hunt, Poschesch, but this will have to do for now,” she said, her voice soothing. The cat sniffed at the rabbit, looked up at her again, then lay down with a huff of air from his lungs, one paw laying atop the carcass. The great beast looked tired, like he had been running all day.

“Go ahead,” she said, careful not to smile. “Eat.”

The cat’s only response was to turn his head away from her, a pointed act of dismissal. He snorted once, and a low growl escaped from his throat with each breath. The animal was proud; more than the chest-thumping Sachem of her tribe, the cat radiated the pride of one born to it. After a moment, the cat lay his head between his paws, nose to rabbit, and stared up at her with eyes full of sorrow.

“*Please,*” she said, “you must eat.” She felt his hunger—knew he was choosing this path

—and if left alone, the animal would die. Soon.

Síipuw knew of only one other choice, but she was loath to do it. All her life she had been good with animals—better even than those who trained ponies and dogs—but her gift with them was not normal. She learned early in her life that she could not only feel what they felt, but that she could impose her thoughts on them. It was the one true magical thing Wmíisan had never taught her. The one thing Síipuw had never even confided to her mentor, though she was sure the old woman suspected.

“I don’t want to do this,” she said, more to herself than the cat. Such a prideful animal should never be chained so, but her only other option was to let it die. With a heavy sigh, Síipuw closed her eyes and slowed her breathing. There was a thread connecting all living things, and she felt for the strand between her and the cat. *There*, she thought, grasping at the spidersilk-thin streamer of *manitou*, careful not to break it. She walked up the thread, and rather than pull him to her, she used it to enter his mind.

Síipuw gasped at the storm of heartache crashing against her mind, and she instantly projected a wall between her and that maelstrom of black emotion. She could not help with the wall in place, however, so she stiffened her resolve and poked a small hole through.

*Running, now. Powerful legs rushing at a gallop down paths between buildings. Changing direction like lightning crackling across the night sky. Two cats joined in mortal combat, claws raking, teeth sinking deep into flesh and muscle, the taste and smell of fresh blood assaulting tongue and nostrils. Both cats on hind legs, front legs batting and slashing. Over as quickly as begun, victor pacing, loser backing. Deafening rumble from behind, dust clouding, stones falling...*

“Stop!” Sípúw, sweating and breathing hard, almost screamed. She held tight to the thread, though, knowing this might be her one chance. There was almost too much pain to push through, but she reached for the one thing she understood—*hunger*.

She focused on that, cultivating it, feeding it until her own stomach growled in sympathy. *Overpowering, gnawing, soul-crushing hunger, like a fist in the belly*. Like a sapling growing into a tall tree, she watched his hunger grow, pushing aside every other thought.

When she withdrew from his mind and opened her eyes, the cat was crunching on the bones of the rabbit as he chewed. He looked up at her, and she could have sworn she saw gratitude.

The rest of the bag went quickly.

#

Sípúw blinked in the bright sunlight as she stepped through the doorway. She shaded her eyes, searching for Gattatáji. He should have been near, but there was no sign of him as she descended the steps to the path.

“That boy will be my death,” she said, shaking her head. He was the closest thing she had to family, though, and she smiled as she raised her hands to her mouth to call out. She never got the chance. The pained yelp from Gattatáji reached her ears first.

It was a short sound, and offered no bearing for her to follow, but it was soon accompanied by laughter of at least two other boys. Gattatáji, small and slender, was often a target for the older and larger boys in the tribe, and Sípúw feared what some might do if he were caught away from his father.

*Like now*, she thought, gripping her spear tight in one fist and running toward the noise.

The boys, from the sound of it, could not be deep in the Wood, but she must be careful with her approach. Too much noise from her, and they will want to hurt him quickly before anyone arrived. And bullies in a hurry could hurt him worse than even they wanted.

She didn't get very far. The two boys, each almost old enough to be braves, had Gattatáji by the arms, dragging him from the Wood. They stopped on the far side of the path, staring with vacant looks at Síipuw. Gattatáji, on skinned knees, raised his head and looked up at her.

"See," he said. "I told you she was in the Place of the Stone Horse!"

One, eyes narrowed at her, sneered. "That little slip of girl is *outside* the Place, wart." He thumped the back of Gattatáji's head with a fist. "Little warts shouldn't lie to their betters."

The second boy, Síipuw's bow and quiver over his shoulder, laughed hard at the other's joke. He batted at Gattatáji as well.

She knew neither of them—not unusual since she rarely visited the village—but she had known boys and girls just like them her whole life. Bullies were cowards by nature, only picking on the weak and soft-hearted. Gattatáji, for now, was both.

Síipuw held her spear across her body in a ready stance, and took one menacing step forward. "That's my bow," she said, pointing at the second boy with the tip of the spear.

Both boys stared at one another for three heartbeats, then broke out laughing, almost doubling over.

"Do you even know how to use that?" the first asked, pointing at the spear.

*No, I don't, she thought, but you don't know that.*

She shrugged with feigned confidence. "The pointy end goes in your belly," she said.

“What else do I need to know?”

The first boy’s face darkened, and he dropped Gattatáji’s arm and took a step forward.

“We’re taking the bow and your little dog’s game bag, and if you’re nice, we’ll leave you the spear... and your face,” he said, pulling a crooked knife from his belt. He tossed it from hand to hand, spinning and flipping it with expert grace, smiling at her as she watched.

Gattatáji pleaded with his eyes for her to let them do what they wanted, but when he lifted his head, a thin trail of blood leaked from the corner of his mouth.

*He fought!* she thought, her eyes widening in new respect. *He fought, and now he wants me to let them have him to protect me.* Her own pride in her little friend was matched only by the bile rising in her throat. Her face and hands grew hot, and she ground her teeth in frustration. The urge to fight was overpowering, and even the knowledge of their eventual defeat and the beating that would follow did not calm her. *If Gattatáji can fight—*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the look on the first boy’s face. All the color had left him, and he dropped the knife as his hands shook. The other boy’s eyes were so wide, it took her a heartbeat to realize they were staring at something behind her.

The low growl stilled not just the boys, but all the birds in the Wood, and she knew with certainty what stood fewer than ten paces from her back.

*I will not turn,* she thought, and dropped the butt of the spear to the stone, spreading her legs in a warrior’s stance.

“It seems,” she said, head tilted, “I have a better crop of friends than you.” She smiled at the boys, the second having already released Gattatáji’s other arm. “Now, drop my bow and the bag, and leave.” She leaned forward. “While you still can.”

The second boy carefully removed the bow and quiver, and set both and the bag beside Gouulik. He turned to run, but looked at his friend for guidance.

The first, color returning to his face, bent to pick up his knife.

“Go!” Síipuw hollered, banging the spear on the stone. At the same time, the growl at her back broke into a full-throated roar, and the trees emptied of birds in a cloud of fluttering wings. The first boy lost control of his bladder, and followed the second, who ran when Síipuw yelled.

When both were deep into the Wood, she turned to look at her cat.

“Thank you, Netáchgan Poschesch,” she said with a reverent nod. The cat lifted his head, eyeing her for a moment, then turned to where Gattatáji still knelt. She followed his gaze, and laughed. “Okay, Brother Cat, you earned it.” She nodded at the game bag. “Can you move well enough, Gattatáji, to toss me the bag?”

He tilted his head at her, then the cat, and pursed his lips, wincing. “I worked hard to fill that thing, you know.”

She laughed. “You or the bag, little flea. I don’t think he cares which.”

Gattatáji snorted, picked up the bag and stood. Rather than throwing it to her, he tossed it far over her head to where the cat stood. He shrugged at the look she gave him. “Might be better if he knows it came from me. *You* he already likes.”

Netáchgan Poschesch took the bag in his mouth and padded back into the building, Síipuw watching him the whole way. She turned back to Gattatáji after the cat was gone. “Think we have time to fill my bag again?”

He snorted once. “Only if that doesn’t come with us,” he said, pointing at the door.

“Still want to come with me next time?”

“More than ever!”

### CHAPTER THREE

On Síipuw's fourth visit two weeks later, Netáchgan Poschesch permitted her to apply a poultice to his sores that her grandmother had taught her to make. Most of his sores had scabbed over, but several were red and weeping. Those were the most difficult as they required cleaning first. Even after weeks of time spent with the beast, Gattatáji remained at the Stone Horse holding the spear in a tight grip while Síipuw nursed the animal's wounds under the shade of the open doorway.

"He's filled out, hasn't he?" Gattatáji said, nodding toward the cat.

"He should," she said, smiling back. "You've been feeding him well. I doubt any rabbits are left within a day's walk."

Gattatáji snorted, then squat on the stone, both hands on the spear. "Maybe, but he needs to hunt on his own at some point," he said. "You may feel he's getting better, but until he hunts," he finished with a shrug.

"I know," Síipuw said, mouth turning down, and she bent back to her work. "He is

unhomed, Gattatáji, and in a pain the wounds of which don't show." She finished the spot she was working on and patted the cat on the back. "He'll get there, though. With time."

Throughout both the process and their conversation, the cat alternated between a rumbling purr and an irritated growl. It did not, much to Gattatáji's obvious relief, move to make a meal of either of them. She was proud of the way the boy braved being near an animal that could swallow his head whole. Gattatáji couldn't see into the cat's mind like Síipuw could. She knew they were safe from the animal, but he didn't have the same assurances she did.

He was here because she was, and was all the braver for it.

"Wmíisan knows," he said, frowning. "Not about, you know..." he waved at the cat, "but she knows you are up to something."

"She trusts me."

"*Should* she?" he asked, his head tilting to one side.

"What do you mean?"

He shook his head, his mouth a thin line. "Well, let's count," he said, holding up one finger. "You went inside a forbidden place," a second finger joined the first, "then you found an unknown magical relic," a third, "*then* you go off for hours at a time without telling her what you're doing." He smiled, one eyebrow raised. "And what would she say about what you do with that time?"

Síipuw started to snap a response, then stopped with her mouth open. *What would the old woman say?* She closed her mouth, watching the cat lick its huge paws. *Why am I even keeping this a secret from her?* That one was easy, of course. *Because she'll take the cat away from me, too.* She knew that was irrational. Netáchgan Poschesch had a mind of his own, and

Wmíisan couldn't just take him away. She could, however, forbid Síipuw from helping him.

*What would I do, then? Would I follow my heart, or the wishes of my elders?*

"I don't know," she said, more to herself than Gattatáji. There would be a time one day when it wouldn't matter—she would be the revered elder teaching an apprentice—but today... *today* she had more than one breeze blowing at her clothes. She knew she was wrong for keeping secrets from her teacher, but if she wanted to help, she—

Netáchgan Poschesch's heavy tongue rasped once, long and wet, against the side of her face. She pulled away, startled, then looked at the wide-eyed awe on Gattatáji's face and laughed. There was a moment his grip tightened on the spear, then he, too, doubled over in laughter. Each time they subsided, they would look at the other and the howls began anew.

Netáchgan Poschesch watched them both, then went back to licking his paws.

#

Gattatáji walked ahead of Síipuw, game bag tight in one hand, the bow in the other. He was taking her to the northern edge of the Wood where they both hoped the hunting would be better. He had been teaching her to shoot, but she was still a poor shot. Taking down an animal on the run required the archer to anticipate the animal's movements, but each time she did this, she ended up inside the mind of her prey. She saw herself from the animal's point of view, and the disorientation that followed sent her shot astray. She performed much better on stationary targets, but few people could eat a tree.

Her ability to enter another's mind had grown over the last few weeks, and she often wondered if that resulted from her communion with Netáchgan Poschesch. There was much to the big cat she neither knew, nor understood. *It could also be nothing more than practice, like*

*using a bow*, she mused.

“Word has spread about your cat,” Gattatáji said without facing her, picking his way through the underbrush. They followed no game trail she could see, but she didn’t doubt his lead.

“You told me last week no one believed those boys,” she said, pushing a branch out of her face to catch up. He really was quick—not just in the open, but in the Wood as well. His feet, small and nimble, never fell wrong, and each step was as silent as a butterfly’s wings.

“No one does, Síipuw, but considering where we live,” he waved at the buildings through the trees, “no one believes it can’t be true, either.” He stopped next to a large tree and leaned against the trunk, setting the bag to the soft forest floor, and wiped sweat from his brow with his sleeve. “It won’t be long before someone brave enough gets the bright idea to see for themselves.”

“That might not be so bright, after all,” she said, pulling on her braid. “I don’t know how he would react to visitors.” She laughed and punched him in the arm. “It’s all he can do to tolerate *you*, little flea.”

He rubbed his arm, frowning. “That’s not funny,” he said, a petulant child emerging from his face for just an instant. He smiled, a wide grin full of self-confidence. “Besides, if he eats me, who feeds him then?”

“I could,” she said, a little petulant herself, and scolding herself for it.

He leaned toward her and winked. “I don’t think he eats *trees*, Síipuw,” he said, and then roared with laughter at his own joke. Birds in the nearby trees took flight, beating wings and creating a roar of their own. She didn’t join in his good humor this time, and he subsided almost

at once. He smiled, raising an eyebrow, then pointed with the bow over her shoulder and beyond the trees. “I don’t think it will matter for a while,” he said. “Storm’s coming in from the southeast, and I think it will be big and long.”

She almost retorted something about his manhood in response, but held her tongue. He would run far with such a comment, and she was no longer in the mood. Gattatáji was almost always right about the weather, and she hoped he was this time. Looking back over her shoulder, she had to agree the clouds gathering there were dark and ominous, piling high enough to touch the stars.

“How long?” she asked, turning back.

He squinted, shading his eyes from the sun still shining overhead, and smelled the air. “We have a few hours, yet.” He grinned at her, dropping his hand to grab the bag. “Enough for you to kill another tree, at least.” Pushing away from the rough bark of the tree, he walked northward. “Come on, Síipuw. Your bag is still too light to take back to Wmíisan.”

She followed, picking her way through the bushes and hoping the storm kept prying eyes away from the cat. *At least until he is strong enough.*

#

As usual, Gattatáji was right about the storm. It was the worst in Síipuw’s memory, and both she and Wmíisan had moved to one of the nearby stone buildings to ride it out. Her mentor saw it coming long before Gattatáji even, and she had Síipuw spend the rest of the day securing all their things in one of the many small buildings in the Wood. The good news was that, as a medicine woman and her apprentice, they had little in the way of personal possessions. The bad news was that Síipuw did not finish until long after the first of the rain fell.

Soaked to the skin, she pulled the large case containing the last of the old woman's herbs and potions into the building, and sealed it up tight. Wmíisan's writings were the first to go into the storehouse, along with most of their tools and the few magical items the woman owned. Síipuw's stone knife was there, sitting patiently at the top of a shelf holding all such things. Wmíisan put it there herself, never allowing Síipuw to touch it.

Wmíisan had already written the wigwam off as a potential loss, and as the wind picked up, Síipuw had to agree. She watched the wind tossing leaves and twigs, pushing the more slender trees over, bending them to the breaking point, and shook her head. "There will be no huts or longhouses left in the Wood after this day," she said. Shouldering her bow and quiver, she took the last spear from the rack at the fire ring, and walked toward the relative safety of the stone building.

Traveling east into the stout wind, she was pushed back one step for every three she took. With a mournful howl of the Wendigo through and between the buildings, the wind was colder than it should be for this time of year, and she pulled her shirt tight against her chest. The rain, falling almost sideways now, pelted her in the face, stinging like a nest of hornets. Part of her wished Wmíisan had helped her with this last task, but the other part knew the old woman would never have made it back.

"As long as the soup is hot when I get there, all is forgiven," she said, a grim smile on her face, already holding the steaming bowl in her mind.

There was a crash in front, and she looked up just in time to dodge a large tree branch carried on the wind. It flew past her with the speed of an eagle, burying itself into the soft wet ground behind. Turning back, she saw many other things flying in the air toward her. Most

were branches stripped of leaves like the one before, but others were the flat plaques mounted to the metal poles the builders left. Her people had guessed long ago they were some kind of directional markers, but the writing never made sense. She dodged one, but a second clipped her on her forehead before she could react. Blood, red and hot, ran into her eyes, blinding her, and she reached up to wipe it away. Her hand touched the long gash at her hairline, and she felt the flap of skin peel back as her eyes filled with black dots.

The black coalesced to the center of her vision even before she realized she was on her knees, the ground complaining with a soft squelch as she tried to stand. Síipuw fell to her side, the building in sight, as the blackness filled her vision. Something tugged at her shoulder, and blackness took her as she slid across the ground.

#

*The hunt was good this day! She ran through the Wood faster than she thought possible, passing trees like a leaf on the wind. Everyone ran with her on the hunt, each doing their part. The black bear was larger than most, but her pride was strong. And they were fast! None were as fast as she, and she led them by right. All stopped, the bear cornered in a long crevasse of stacked stone, and she paced as the others took their places. Soon she would leap...*

Síipuw woke from the dream, afraid to open her eyes. She lay in a soft bed, sunlight streaming through an open window, warming her legs. The fur blanket she held was warm and soft, but the pain in her head would not let her enjoy it. She wanted to reach up to feel the wound, but she knew better. She cracked open one eye just as her fur blanket sneezed.

“Ah, awake at last,” Wmíisan said, sitting in a wooden chair far from the foot of the bed. “We thought you might never wake.”

Sípuw was barely listening. She sat up, regretting it at once, and looked at her blanket. Soft fur heaved in slow contented breaths, and the head at her end lifted, tawny mane encircling his face. Netáchgan Poschesch leaned forward and licked her face just once, then pulled back to study her. She smiled, threw her arms around the huge cat, and he settled back to the bed, satisfied.

“That thing dragged you here in the middle of the storm,” Wmíisan said from her chair. “I almost poked him with a spear before I saw what he was doing.”

“How long have I...” she croaked, her throat dry as summer leaves.

“Two days. Your friend there hasn’t left your side the whole time,” Wmíisan said, and winced. “He didn’t like me stitching you up, but we came to an... agreement.” She tilted her head and smiled at the cat. “Right, big boy?”

Netáchgan Poschesch’s response was a quick whip of his tail, but the rumbling purr gave him away.

Wmíisan stood, joints popping, and the cat’s purr turned to a soft growl. “Don’t worry,” she said to the animal, “I’m only going to get you and your charge some food.” She straightened her back and turned to leave, but looked back over her shoulder. “You have been holding out on me, Sípuw, and not just about the cat,” she said. “We will discuss this when you are stronger.” With that last filling the space between them, she left the two alone.

When she had gone, Sípuw looked at the cat, a thin smile on her face. “I think she’s mad. What do you think?”

Netáchgan turned his head to the door and sneezed.

“Yes, I agree,” she said. She reached up and scratched behind one of his ears. “How do

you always know when I need you?" she asked. She expected no answer, but he turned to face her, his eyes locking to hers. Her world went white, the pain in her head gone, and in that white she stood within a ring of cats like Netáchgan. Two male, but the others, smaller and without the thick mane, were obviously female. She and Netáchgan stood in the center of that ring as the others paced, each nodding low to them in turn.

The vision vanished as quickly as it came, though the pain in her head was not as bad as before. She pulled back, her eyes still locked with his. "I think I understand," she said, tears welling. She held him tight to her in a fierce hug. "It is the same for me, Netáchgan. I think I named you well."

He chuffed once, and when she released him, lay back to the bed. His purr was much louder now, and she lay back, stroking the fur of his mane.

In moments they were both snoring, and in their dreams they hunted the Wood together.

#

The next day, Netáchgan was gone, and Wmíisan was changing the bandage wrapped around Síipuw's head. Unusually gentle, the woman tugged at the strip of material, careful of the scabbing around her stitches. One last pull and the bandage came free. Wmíisan probed the area with a boney finger, and Síipuw winced.

"Does that hurt?" Wmíisan asked.

"A little," Síipuw said, nodding.

"It's red, but that is to be expected." She felt the girl's face and forehead. "No fever, so I think it's healing properly." She took a cloth from where it soaked in a bowl of one of the woman's healing potions and dabbed at the wound. "I should be able to remove the stitching in

a week, maybe less.”

Síipuw chewed on her bottom lip as Wmíisan worked, her eyes scanning the room.

“Your cat left early this morning before you woke,” Wmíisan said, then barked an old crone’s laugh. “He didn’t tell me where he was going.”

Síipuw had to laugh at that as well, but she was careful not to move too much. Her head still throbbed, and sudden motion made her stomach churn.

A light rap on the door caught both their attention, and they turned to where Gattatáji stood in the doorway. His eyes grew wide as they tracked to the wound on Síipuw’s head, and the color faded from his face. He shuffled from one foot to the other and looked down.

“May I enter?” he said without looking at either of them.

“Of course,” Wmíisan said before Síipuw could answer. “You can help me re-wrap this clumsy oaf’s head,” she said with a wide grin. She waved for Gattatáji to enter, then pat the bed next to her, inviting him to sit. “Grab that roll of bandages from the table on your way,” she said with a soft smile. While he complied, she applied a thick, foul-smelling ocherous poultice, slathering it on and around her wound. Gattatáji sat and handed her the roll of fibrous material. He watched as Wmíisan unrolled the bandage, winding it around Síipuw’s head before tying it off in back just under her braid. She inspected her work and nodded once. “Good enough,” she said, and stood, gathering the bowl, poultice, and used bandage. “Rest now,” she said to Síipuw, then turned to Gattatáji and wagged a finger in his face. “And *you*,” she said, “make sure she does.”

With that, she turned and walked out, leaving the two friends alone. They watched her leave, and then Gattatáji faced Síipuw.

“I would have come sooner, but we have been cleaning up the village since the storm.”

“Was it really that bad?” she asked. Wmíisan had not allowed her to leave her bed, much less the building, so she still hadn’t seen what the storm had wrought.

His face twisted. “You were *in* it, Síipuw. Didn’t you see how bad it was?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I got knocked out almost as soon as the wind picked up. If it hadn’t been for Netáchgan…”

He dropped his eyes to his hands. “I heard.” He took her hands in his and gazed deep into her eyes. “*Everyone’s* heard, Síipuw,” he whispered, blank fear crossing his face. “There are many who are afraid, now. And not of just the cat.”

“That’s silly,” she said, shaking her head. Her temples throbbed at the motion, and she stopped at once. *Is it?* she wondered, tilting her head. Even deep concentration increased the pain, but to stop questioning was to stop learning. Her grandmother taught her that. Not as powerful a medicine woman as Wmíisan, she, like Síipuw, could also speak to animals. *There is nothing for anyone to fear though. So I can speak to animals. What does that matter?*

But it did matter, and she knew it. If there was one thing she had learned in her short life, it was that people feared what they did not understand. She saw it in their faces every time Wmíisan cured a child, or charmed an arrow, or performed any of the other hundreds of minor miracles for her people. She saw it even now on Gattatáji’s face.

“I am only telling you what I hear, Síipuw,” he said, picking at the covers over her legs. “The talk is not kind.”

“What do they think I will do? Send Netáchgan Poschesch to kill their babies? Tell the crows to eat all their corn?” *This is all so stupid*, she thought. And yet... what if she *did* those

things? Worse, what if they happened *anyway*, without her instruction? How would she convince anyone it wasn't by her bidding?

“On the other hand,” Gattatáji said, a hint of playful smile on his lips, “the bullies leave me alone now.”

It wasn't enough to brighten her mood, but it would have to do. Her head hurt more than ever now, and she lay back, wondering where everything went wrong. She should be happy, but the feeling kept slipping from her grasp, like the stone knife from Wmíisan's hands. She reached up with one hand to rub her temple and closed her eyes.

“Would you like me to go now?” he asked, his voice almost breaking.

“No,” she said, taking his hands into hers. “I need to rest, but it would help a lot if you stayed until I fell asleep.” She smiled and squeezed his hands.

“I can do that,” he said. When she closed her eyes, he sang to her. Soft and clear, in a voice as pure as his heart, he sang the lullaby her grandmother used when she was little.

*In another moon I turn fourteen, she thought, falling to the deep. And I am no closer to being an adult than the day I was born.* Her mind drifted to Netáchgan, and then her mind just drifted.

#

“Eat,” Wmíisan said, placing the bowl and spoon in her hands. Síipuw sat up and took a spoonful of the stew. Drawing it to her mouth she inhaled the rich aroma, and her stomach growled agreement.

“Rabbit?” she asked, one eyebrow raised. “When did you find the time?”

“Not I, simple girl,” Wmíisan said. She nodded to the cat stretched at the foot of the

bed, head lolling off to the side. “Been bringing rabbits and birds all day and dropping them at my feet.” She snorted at the cat. “Your friend does not think highly of our hunting skills. He seems to feel we are kittens to be fed.”

Síipuw dropped her spoon into the bowl and reached out to rub Netáchgan’s belly. “Thank you, Brother,” she said to him, smiling. He lifted his head, chuffed once, and lowered it again. “I think he’s laughing at us.”

“At an old woman and a callow apprentice?” she sniffed. “What is there to laugh at?”

Wmíisan was stalling, and Síipuw knew it. There were so many questions between them, and as she lifted the spoon to her mouth, she knew the time had come.

“Go ahead,” she said around the stew in her mouth. “Ask your questions.”

“How long have you known about your gift?”

Síipuw chewed and swallowed slower than was necessary. For the first time since her delivery into the woman’s care, she dictated the flow of knowledge, and she wanted the feeling to last. She had no control over her own life, but that was as it should be for a girl her age. What was not expected was that, even as an apprentice medicine woman, she would still get no respect. Heat rose in her core, regardless of any attempt to quell it.

“Since before my grandmother died,” she said, and took another careful spoonful. Her heart pounded in her chest, threatening to burst through; blood rushing up her neck, swelling her head like a ripening melon.

“I see,” her teacher said. She was silent then for a long time, and just as Síipuw was sure that was all, the woman spoke again. “And why did you hide this from me?” It was clear from the way she spoke she meant more than just the gift.

“Because it’s the only thing that is mine!” she cried, suddenly angry and hurt all at the same time. “Because you would just take him away from me!” This time she did cry, tears squeezing from the corners of her eyes.

“Like the stone knife,” the woman said, her voice flat.

“Yes,” Síipuw said, tears streaming down her face. “Just like that!” Mere seconds ago, she had been in control. Now she was just a gibbering little *girl*, whining about a doll or a pet. “It’s mine!” she said, unable to control herself. “It calls to me. Did you know that? I can hear it still.”

Wmíisan sighed, the sound of the sea in a shell, and took the bowl from Síipuw’s hands. She placed it at her side, then took the girl’s hands in her own, peering deep in her eyes. Searching for something, Síipuw knew, and perhaps not finding it.

“That knife holds much magic,” she said, her eyes locked with the girl’s. “I still don’t know what it is, or what it is for, but if your actions over the last weeks have shown me anything, it is that you are not ready for such responsibility.” She sighed again and patted Síipuw’s hands as she spoke. “It is clear I need to find out, though,” she said, dropping the hands and standing. “There is a medicine man north of here who might know more about this relic, and I’ve decided to seek him out.” She looked out the window, but her eyes locked on something much farther away than the Wood across the way. “Perhaps he can cast some light on this.”

“When do we leave?” she asked, sitting straighter, wiping tears dry even as she spoke.

“Not ‘we’, foolish girl. Just me. You are still too weak to travel, and I fear this must be done sooner rather than later.”

“But—”

“Hush, girl. Your little two-spirit can help you, and your friend here,” she said, pointing at the cat, “can watch over you while I’m away.”

“I can’t rebuild the wigwam by myself,” Síipuw said, protesting.

“That is a lost cause, I’m afraid. The storm took everything but what you stored away.”

*My home... gone?* The little room where she had spent the last two years wasn’t much, but it was hers.

“Our time in the Wood was only for your initial training, girl. We would have been here sooner if you had been better with a bow,” Wmíisan said, laughing. Her eyes softened, and her mouth turned down. “I won’t be gone more than a couple of days. A hand at most,” she said, holding up her right hand—the one with the last finger missing.

“What should I do while you are away?” There was much she wanted to do, but her respect for Wmíisan would not allow her the option. She settled back in the bed, knowing her coming days would be dull.

“Heal,” the woman said as if it were obvious. “That and study your protection charms. I fear you may need those.”

#

By the time Wmíisan had gathered everything into her pack, Síipuw was more than ready to see her go. There was always that point in every departure where the one staying behind just wished everyone would leave. Síipuw reached it when Wmíisan was still planning her route.

Síipuw stood beside her bed and helped Wmíisan shoulder her pack. The woman had a

crossbow slung over the other, and carried a short spear in one hand. The last she would use more as a cane than a weapon, her legs not as strong and sure as they once had been.

Outside the window, dark clouds billowed. These were more the heavy gray of winter, rather than the fast moving towers of the previous storm. The air was damp and cold, and Síipuw was glad she would not be traveling with the old woman this day. She would complain about her joints the entire journey.

“Bring me the knife, girl,” Wmíisan said, patting the pockets of her vest, checking one last time to be sure she had everything. “Be sure it is wrapped,” she called to the girl’s back.

Síipuw bit back a sharp response, instead walking in silence to the shelves where the knife lay. It was still wrapped—just as it had been since the moment she brought it home—though the wrapping was now stiff and dry. She stretched, standing on her toes, and tugged at a corner of the knife’s protective wrapping, teasing it to the edge where she could get a clean hold. Before she could wrap her hand around it, the bundle toppled from the shelf, spilling the knife. Time slowed as she watched it tumble out of the air, turning once on its way to the wood floor. It hit, point first, and buried itself one knuckle deep into the soft wood.

The floor rippled once like tossing a pebble into a pond, warped wooden rings radiating outward before stilling again. Síipuw blinked once, unsure of what she saw, but when she pressed her foot to the floor near the knife, it was as solid as always. She turned, but Wmíisan was still fussing with her vest and hadn’t seen what happened. She heard, though.

“Clumsy oaf,” she said. “Wrap that knife up and bring it here.”

“Yes, elder,” Síipuw said, bowing her head in a respectful nod. She knelt beside the knife, grabbed the handle, and pulled. It didn’t budge.

“Hurry, girl. I don’t have all day,” the old woman said, tapping her foot.

Síipuw wrapped both hands around the handle, grinding the coarse leather strapping, and tried rocking the tip side to side. It moved only slightly, but her confidence grew and she yanked hard. It came away so easily she fell back, landing in a seated position with her legs splayed before her. Something dripped from the end of the blade, and she held the thing close to her eyes.

*Sap?*, she thought, eyebrows furrowed, her head tilted. *This flooring is a hundred years old, at least.* She leaned forward to inspect the short gash in the floor.

“Wrap it up, child,” Wmíisan said with a heavy sigh.

Síipuw sighed herself, gathered the wrapping, and stood. She placed the knife in the center and folded the cloth over before rolling it up in a bundle. Grabbing a leather thong from another shelf, she tied the bundle and turned to present it to Wmíisan.

“Put it in the pack, child,” the woman said, still refusing to touch it. Síipuw complied, placing it inside, then folding the flap down to latch it closed. Wmíisan smiled at her then, and patted her on the cheek like a she were a small child. “I will be back soon, Síipuw. Please don’t go out while I am away.”

It was the most concern the woman had ever shown for her health and safety, and Síipuw gave her a warm smile in return. “I’ll be fine. *You* be careful.”

“Bah!” she said. “Who would hurt an old woman?”

Síipuw walked her mentor out, the gash in the floor already forgotten.

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