

BAWATING MAY'WINZHA:

*A long time ago, at the place of fast rushing waters.*

by

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**Abstract**

The thesis that follows is a work of historical fiction, depicting a time and place four hundred years ago. It was written with a point of breaking down social barriers, classifications, and stereotypes. Although binary classifications may be useful for their simplicity, the exclusionary paradigm is unfit to handle the complexity of history, of life. The very nature of the paradigm chafes against relational principles – which are fundamentally grounded upon the notion that everything and everyone is intimately related – and held as truth by many Indigenous nations. In this project, it was a goal to eliminate these categorical distinctions by telling a story with dynamic characters that challenge standard conceptions of ‘good or bad’ and ‘right or wrong’, and that interact closely with the historical record.

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**Introduction**

The thesis that follows this introductory note is a representation of thoughts, theories, and realities. It is a work of historical fiction, depicting a time and place four hundred years ago. The choice to write an academic thesis in a creative writing genre was largely motivated by the desire to break down social barriers, classifications, and stereotypes. Most importantly, it was an attempt to erase, or at least blur the lines of, racial othering. As a student of Native Studies, I became deeply cognizant of binary racial classifications as they relate to ‘Indigenous’ peoples – and subsequently very troubled by them. These classifications include, but are not limited to: “Colonizer and the Colonized”, “Aboriginal, Non-Aboriginal” “Status and Non-Status”, “On Reserve, Off Reserve”. The problem is that these binary classifications are then assigned an “either/or” mode of judgment (by society) such as “good or bad” and “right or wrong”. Depending on who you are, and where you fit in the schematics, it’s really ‘us vs. them’. While useful for its simplicity, this exclusionary paradigm is unfit to handle the complexity of history, of life. The very nature of the paradigm chafes against relational principles – which are fundamentally grounded upon the notion that everything and everyone is intimately related, and held as truth by many Indigenous nations. In this project, it was a goal to eliminate these categorical distinctions that are prevalent in colonial discourses by telling a story with dynamic characters that challenge standard conceptions of ‘good or bad’ and ‘right or wrong’, and that interact closely with the historical record. Before I get into the plot and talk about how it serves to meet its objective though, I would like to take a moment to discuss how storytelling functions as a pedagogical tool and the application of relationality in a literary context.

When simply considered, history is a collection of stories about events and people during a specific period of time. The Anishinaabe, among countless other Indigenous nations, have relied on storytelling to know these things for as long as anyone can remember – time immemorial, as they say. However, the arrival of Europeans on Turtle Island about 500 years ago marked the beginning of when these ways of knowing have been under attack – first by the Christian church, and eventually colonial governments and schools. Nevertheless, despite all the hostility from these Western institutions, storytelling has persevered; it has emerged from the methodological battleground as a valid way of presenting and acquiring knowledge (Archibald, McLeod, Kovach). In Canada, this turn of events can largely be attributed to the 1997 Delgamuukw decision, in which the supreme court ruled that oral stories “are tangential to the ultimate purpose of the fact-finding process at trial -- the determination of the historical truth” (Parliament of Canada). That the courts refer to oral stories as “tangential” to the fact-finding process, is an indication that they, and the rest of Canada, are only beginning to understand what Indigenous nations have known for countless generations. With just a little more time and education, the true potential of oral sources and storytelling can be realized such that it makes any history being told richer, fuller, more complete.

In writing my thesis, I was conscious of the fact that history is unavoidably told through a certain lens. It is a lens that privileges a certain voice over another, creating an imbalanced relationship, thus setting up a binary relationship. Emma LaRocque has identified this relationship as the “civ/sav” dichotomy (2010). The categories are equipped with their own list of binary traits, but may be summarized here as “good/bad” and “right/wrong” respectively. This dichotomy has existed for as long as there has been

a colonial relationship, and the natural reaction of Indigenous writers has been to either take a “defensive stance by saying ‘we are civilized’ and seek to establish that Native peoples were civilized, that they had and have cultures, [or] by countering that it is the Whiteman, not the Native people, who were or are the savages” (LaRocque, 2010). The problem is that this does nothing to disrupt the binary and very oppositional relationship.

If one considers the catalogue of ‘contact’ literature that is presently in circulation, one will first see that the catalogue is actually sparse, and that it is characterized by violence and anger: feelings that create an oppositional, relational discord. Just to name a few examples: in *The Beothuk Saga* by Bernard Assiniwi, the Beothuk nation is driven to extinction; James Welch’s *Fools Crow* ends in a bloody massacre; in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, the protagonist is driven to commit suicide; Joseph Boyden most recently continued the theme of violence with his *The Orenda*. It is not altogether surprising that these themes dominate the genre since there actually is a lot of animosity (on both sides of the colonial fence) regarding this point in history, but the fact remains that it is these ill feelings that are the source and perpetuation of the ‘civ/sav’ dichotomy. It is for this reason that I have chosen to weave my story around love, the most powerful and enduring of all human emotions, as a way to embrace relationships and break the cycle of violence and anger. As writers, I believe that if we can start constructing stories that employ relational principles, we can overcome the ‘civ/sav’ dichotomy.

The ‘all my relations’ concept that is prevalent amongst many Indigenous worldviews, and is discussed by such diverse scholars as Paula Gunn Allen, Marie Battiste, and Daniel Heath Justice is one that embodies relational principles.

Relationality is not only critically important to Indigenous epistemologies, it is also incredibly expansive. It encompasses every conceivable aspect of society, nature and the environment, from the beginning of time to the indeterminable future. Thus, the very nature of relationality undermines the practical use of any binary process, as it inevitably blurs the lines of categorizations. Furthermore, relationality works as a decolonizing praxis by virtue of deconstructing the binary categorization ('colonizers and the colonized') that colonization is defined upon (Memmi). If we can apply this concept into a literary context, it can provide a new way of coming to understand the colonial relationship.

Relationality does not simply suggest that there is a relational component between two variables, but asserts that anything and everything /everyone is intricately related (Wilson, 2008). By telling a story that utilizes a variety of research materials such as academic texts, oral stories, and fictional narratives, and bringing them together into one comprehensive body, the project itself becomes a relational body, while its content applies relational concepts to construct a multidimensional perspective of a historic event. In addition to providing different perspectives from characters who have different cultural backgrounds, another way relationality can be observed is with the exploration of a number of different themes. Some of these themes include incorporating oral stories and traditions of the Anishinaabeg, the roles of women in their community, trade activities with the French, and the role of French missionaries. The themes address pertinent social issues that are not only relevant to the time and setting of the story (ie. the fur trade), but also issues being discussed today (ie. the role of women, the inclusion of oral stories). Further, the characters' expression of these themes through their interactions and



relationships with other characters is important with respect to conveying different attitudes and beliefs about any given topic. Fred Stenson talks about this in *Speaking in the Past Tense*:

Taking a variety of experiences and playing them off against one another prevents you from dominating the story with your own imagining of one experience. If you say, “Well, I am most enticed to view this world through Harriott,” then it becomes Harriott’s nineteenth century, Harriott’s fur trade, whereas if you are also looking at it through Rowand and through Robert Rundle and through Jimmy Jock Bird, it is these points of view struggling with one another, pulling in their own direction, and perhaps you arrive at something more balanced, something like a truth that exceeds the singular invention. (Wyle, 2007:209)

The characters I have created in my story come from different cultural backgrounds, and they each have their own individual opinion in any given circumstance. In this way, I have tried to set my story up just as Stenson talks about, to arrive at that point where the end result is something more balanced, nuanced, layered.

I think at this point, it is important for me to say that although I am Anishinaabe, and I am writing about a point in history of my people, I by no means own their voice. What I have written is my own impression of what life and circumstances may have been like at the point of colonial contact, based on the research I have done and what I know of Anishinaabek culture. Rudy Wiebe says, “I don’t own the Mennonite voice, any more than Maria Campbell own the Métis voice, or Tomson Highway own the Cree voice. We bring our past with us, but the voices that we have are our own; they are not *the* voices of a people” (Wyle, 2007:70). As far as the writing goes, I would agree with Wayne Johnston’s understanding of what it means to write historical fiction: “Historical fiction as I understand it, or as I practice it, records an impression of history. It is impressionistic writing in exactly the way that some painting is impressionistic painting”

(Wyile, 2007:113). For me, writing *Bawating May'winzha* had much more to do with capturing the *spirit* of the history, than it did to be completely obedient to the historical record (which we know is biased and full of gaps anyway). It was about creating a story that was plausible and educational, but also one that was very entertaining. “The whole business of creating plausible fictional scenarios that fit and fill gaps in the historical record is something that can have a lot of utility for students of history, provided it is understood what you are doing” (Wyile, 2007:200). I wanted people to enjoy the reading as much I wanted them to learn something from it.

I'd like to move forward now by highlighting certain aspects of the story I have written, and show where storytelling intersects with the historical record. The story is broken up into four chapters: Quest, Voyage, Journey, and Diaspora. One will notice that each of the chapter titles connotes a mode a travel. In her book, *Travelling Knowledges*, Renate Eigenbrod uses the concept of travel as a metaphor for society to be open towards change, fluidity of knowledge, changes and adaptations of culture as opposed to being stuck in a fixed or static mindset (Eigenbrod, 2005). For me, this was a way of illustrating how different ideas and perspectives can interact with each other to bring about a common purpose.

The decision to begin the story with a Sweat Lodge ceremony was two-fold. First, I wanted to frame the setting in a particular cultural context so that the reader knows from the beginning that the story being told is from a different place and time from the present. The title, “Quest”, is a reference to the vision quest that my Anishinaabe protagonist, Akiwenzi, embarks on in the chapter. According to Basil Johnston, the presence of Europeans on Turtle Island was foreseen by someone who

participated in such a quest. The quest would have been preceded by a Sweat Lodge ceremony, as it is in the story, which is something I learned from my conversations with Ronnie Beaver and Ash Bottle – two Anishinaabek men with rich cultural knowledge. The use of Anishinaabemowin for names, places, and other common phrases was a conscious strategy to establish cultural positioning in the narrative, as was the case of the inclusion of oral stories, such as the dancing geese story and later on, the creation story.

Just as Chapter One was very much about establishing cultural positioning and introducing key characters, Chapter Two does the same thing for the French characters in the story. In this chapter the reader is introduced to Dampier, Rioux, and Avanthey, each of whom have very different personalities, values, and beliefs. Whereas I imagined Dampier as a fur trader largely motivated by his desire to acquire wealth, Rioux's pious character is taken straight out of the pages of the Jesuit Relations. This, again, was a way of tracing the story back to the historical record – so that the attitudes and beliefs of the French, particularly Rioux, were consistent with what was written at that time. The character of Avanthey was created based on a functional need for a translator, but also as someone to offset the other French personalities; as someone who was able to redeem the others, to show that not all men are 'bad'.

Chapter Three's "Journey" details the initial meeting between Akiwenzi, Dampier and Avanthey. The decision to set the meeting up as it unfolds in the story was inspired by an account that is told by William Warren's landmark *History of the Ojibway People*, in which he states that the meeting occurred on the bank of a river, when a young Anishinaabe man came across two starving, cold Frenchmen. In my story, the meeting occurs at the "river valley of the Nipissing", otherwise known as French River. Given the

geographical location of Ossossané (where the Frenchmen attended the Feast of the Dead ceremony) and Bawating (home of Akiwenzi), French River seemed to be the most logical location where such a meeting would take place.

Chapter Four – Diaspora – sees the Frenchmen come to Bawating not only with their tools and weapons for trade, but their values and beliefs too. Rioux goes on an ardent Christianizing mission that is aided by the spread of a disease that sweeps across the community. Dampier introduces the community to alcohol and tries to convince Migizii, one of the community leaders, to allow him to marry his daughter – a practice very common for the time. In the end, Akiwenzi decides that the community is no longer safe, and that he must move somewhere else, “where food grows on the water”. The decision to end the story as such was one that was based on the historical record. In *Holding Our World Together*, Brenda Child writes “In the early seventeenth century, a portion of the Boweting [sic] population moved west to form a significant southern Ojibwe settlement that became known after the fur trade as the village of LaPointe, on Lake Superior’s Madeline Island” (Child, 2012:xiii). Being that the story occurs in the early seventeenth century and Akiwenzi’s community is stricken with disease and alcoholism, it made sense that he and a few others would try to escape and go to a place where they can build a new life.

This project began with a simple idea of breaking away from canonical methods of presenting and acquiring knowledge by applying the law of relationality in a literary context. I believe I have accomplished this by utilizing a variety of different resources to tell a story that provides multiple perspectives about a certain time and place four hundred years ago. As Indigenous people, reclaiming our history is a significant step in

the process of decolonization, a process which begins by finding one's voice and using that voice to assert one's identity. By constructing a literary narrative that encompasses relational principles where the binary distinctions of 'us and them' are broken down, the process of decolonization has the potential to advance forward, and we can cease to be the colonizers and the colonized.

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**Chapter One: Quest**

“Boozhoo Mii’shomis,” Akiwenzi said as the Grandfathers were brought into the lodge one by one. As they came in, Birds’s Eye Woman sprinkled a pinch of tobacco on each stone, casting a spine-tingling glow within the lodge. When the last of eight was brought in, the east door was sealed, and the Sweat had begun.

“Our nephew, Akiwenzi, asked me to conduct this ceremony this evening so that he can embark on his vision quest tomorrow with a clear mind,” Migizii said. “He is of the age now, where he must choose a path in life. Let us all pray to Gichi Manitou and to the Grandfathers and Grandmothers that they make his path free of obstacles.”

“Ahow!” everyone said. Akiwenzi though, remained silent.

With that, Migizii picked up an earthen jug and poured a dose of water onto the Grandfathers. The water sizzled on the stones, sending a heatwave throughout the lodge. Okijita felt the fine hairs on his arms stand on end as he was hit with the blast. The first beads of sweat began percolating on his forehead. “Mii’gwech Mii’shoomis,” he said.

Migizii picked up a turtle shell rattle and shook it before uttering a prayer. “Gichi Manitou, we are grateful for this life you have given us. The winter has passed and our community is strong,” he said.

“Ahow!” everyone said.

“Gichi Manitou,” Migizii continued. “One of our young warriors is about to become a man. We ask that you watch over him and protect him and guide him on his journey.”

Somewhere, in the darkness of the lodge, a smile crept upon the face of Zoongdekwe. She admired Akiwenzi's humble character. His calm and gentle nature was a refreshing contrast from her brother Okijita, whose brazen personality made him popular in Bawating. For her, there was something vulnerable about Akiwenzi, something that made her want to hold him and take care of him. She knew that his quest was an important one, as it would determine his standing in the community.

As Migizii continued his prayer, Akiwenzi concentrated on his own. His past two vision quests had not yielded good results. Last spring he was on the land for four days; he prayed hard and fasted the entire time, but his dreams made no sense. Images of people with light colored skin and thick hair on their faces cluttered his thoughts. Such people don't exist, he thought. It's meaningless. People doubted whether Akiwenzi was indeed the prophet that his grandfather proclaimed him to be at his birth. Akiwenzi understood the disbelief, for shades of it had begun to seep in his own mind. Yet he refused to give up.

"I want to sing a travelling song for our brother," Okijita said, stirring Akiwenzi from his thoughts. "I will ask my spirit protector and clan brother, the bear, to protect him on his quest." Okijita then held his beaver drum close to the still glowing Grandfathers, tightening the skin on his drum. When the drum was ready, Okijita drew it close to his body and began hitting a pulsating beat. After he sung the first verse himself, the seven others in the lodge re-joined the verse, singing in unison.

After the song, Migizii called the end of the first round. The two women, Bird's Eye Woman and Zoongdekwe, along with a youth, left the lodge through the east door for



a breath of fresh air. Akiwenzi, Migizii, Okijita, and two other men stayed in the lodge, taking turns sipping water from a jug. While the women were outside, the men basked in the cool spring breeze coming from the open door flap, allowing the air to perforate the beads of sweat on their, still, hot bodies. Moonlight cast the interior of the lodge in a luminous blue-silver glow. The chest high lodge had a wide circumference, bound together with spruce boughs and sinew made from moose cartilage. The ceiling was adorned with multiple eagle feathers and sea shells. Red ochre was hand-painted on the moose skin canvas.

Outside, the women made preparations for the feast. It was a seasonably warm, early spring evening. Ice was broken up on the inland lakes, and some of the geese had already returned from their vacation down south. The fish were so abundant that one could almost walk across the river on their backs. The forest was usually dense around the ceremonial grounds, but the maple and birch trees were still bare from their winter slumber. In just a few days, the trees would bud, eventually giving birth to new green leaves.

Bird's Eye Woman glanced over to her daughter who was working silently, near the active fire. She noticed a pursed smile upon her daughter's lips, and admired her lustrous black hair that was shining in the moonlight. What a beautiful young woman she had become, she thought. "Dawnis, you look radiant this evening," she said. "What are you thinking about?"

"Ah, mii'gwech mama," Zoongdekwe replied. "I think of nothing in particular. I am just grateful for the return of the season of rebirth."

“Yes it is a splendid evening; mino-dibikan,” Bird’s Eye Woman lifted her head and absorbed the burgeoning life around her with a deep exhale of the placid spring air. “Mino-dibikan,” she said. “Yes, it’s a splendid evening, but it’s been many moons since I’ve seen you this happy,” she continued. “Is there anything else on your mind?”

“Yes, that’s all mama. I am happy for Akiwenzi. I think his quest will be a successful one.”

Bird’s Eye Woman smiled. “Ah, I see. Do you admire him?”

Zoongdekwe’s eyes twinkled at the thought. A wide smile emerged, revealing her straight, white teeth. “I can’t lie, mama. I do admire him. I think he is a kind man, and I find him charming.”

“I am happy for you dawnis. Does he know how you feel?”

“I haven’t said anything to him. I don’t want to cloud his thoughts before he goes on his quest.”

Bird’s Eye Woman nodded her head. “That’s very wise. Ahow, come my girl. Let’s go back into the lodge now.”

“Ahow, mama.”

The skin-scorching heat of the second and third rounds proved to be a worthy test of endurance for all the participants in the Sweat. Everyone was saturated with a thick coat of sweat, but still, the drums were beaten with a frenetic fervour and the songs sung in a harmonic pitch. Okijita arched his head, sending his long hair to the small of his back before letting out a thunderous cry. From the edge of the northern doorway,

Zoongdekwe felt the reverberations of her brother's spirit and unleashed a low ethereal hum that resonated throughout the lodge. A bead of sweat slipped down Akiwenzi's brow and collected briefly on his cheek before finally dripping down to the canvas of evergreen firs beneath his feet. He meditated amidst the controlled chaos around him.

To begin the fourth and final round of the Sweat, Migizii summoned the will of the Grandfathers to bring a conclusion to the ceremony. The Grandfathers answered with a cascade of searing heat to purge the people's spirits of their impurities. Wave after wave, the heat bore down with a punishing force. At length, Zoongdekwe sang a final honor song for Akiwenzi. Okijita began, by building a slow but steadily rising drumbeat. At the apex of the rising tempo, Zoongdekwe collected the energy of the beat and transferred it into her lilting voice. Bird's Eye Woman joined in at the chorus, bringing the song to an ecstatic crescendo. Akiwenzi sensed the urgency of his people's prayers and vowed to honor their spirits.

With the song over, and the people thoroughly exhausted, Migizii commanded the east door to be opened. Without delay, the door flung open and the night breeze enveloped the people in a quilt of rejuvenating peace. At last, they were washed clean.

Grandmother Moon was already high in her ascent among the stars when the people filed out of the lodge. Being a clear night, free from the cover of clouds, there was plenty of light and warmth from the robust campfire. The men gathered the Grandfathers in the lodge and retired them to a resting place some yards off from the ceremonial grounds, while the women made final preparations for the feast.

Akiwenzi sat on a fallen tree, felled from a summer tempest the previous season. Its mighty roots were detached from the land it was once connected to. He deposited a blueberry into his mouth and savoured its sweetness; at no time are they any better than after a Sweat. He sat quietly, thinking about the quest that loomed before him. When he looked up, Zoongdekwe was walking towards him. Her gait shifted her wraparound skirt to and fro, just above her knees. The fire glistened off the outside of her thighs. She wore a seashell necklace that bounced off her bare, ample breasts in rhythm with her stride. Akiwenzi succumbed to thoughts of passionate lovemaking with this woman of his longing. In her presence, the stars seemed to shine brighter and the air seemed sweeter to breathe. Heat surged in his teenaged loins; his manhood throbbed and demanded attention, but he remained still.

“Aniin Akiwenzi?” Zoongdekwe said, as she sat down on the tree trunk beside him. She had a bowl of moose meat and wild rice in her hands.

“I’m well. It was a wonderful ceremony tonight. Mii’gwech.”

Zoongdekwe smiled, and rested her hand on Akiwenzi’s lap. “My father was happy to do it,” she said. “He thinks highly of you, as do I, and all my family.”

The flickering fire light highlighted the contours of Zoongdekwe’s face, revealing the faint freckles beneath her eyes. “It pleases me to hear that,” Akiwenzi said, looking deep into Zoongdekwe’s mahogany colored eyes. “I promise to fulfill my duty.”

“I think that you will. I have great confidence in you,” she said.

The young couple shared a brief moment of silence in which they both imagined a future together, raising a family of their own. But customary laws required Akiwenzi to keep his feelings to himself until the community deemed him a man of good standing among his people. The vision quest was that gateway to manhood.

“We should leave soon,” Migizii said. “The night is getting late, and Akiwenzi needs to get a good night’s rest.”

And so, Akiwenzi offered his thanks and the lodge was quickly disrobed, leaving only its frame intact. The women gathered the food and clothing and placed them in a birch bark sled, while the men collected their sacred items and put out the campfire. Within moments, the travelling party was ready to begin their one mile trek back to Bawating, the place of fast rushing waters.

Okijita led the convoy on a hard-packed trail. He was followed by Akiwenzi and a youth who pulled the sled. Maple and birch trees lined both sides of the pathway. The two women, Bird’s Eye Woman and Zoongdekwe, were in the middle of the party, and were followed by Migizii and another youth. It wasn’t long before the rumble of the rapids was heard by all, under the light of Grandmother Moon.

\* \* \*

Bawating was a sacred site and home of the Anishinaabe for countless generations. The strategic location and wealth of their territory let them forge alliances with the Odawa of Manitoulin and the Potawatomi of Mishigaama – thus establishing the Three Fires Confederacy – but their trade networks also included the Wendat, Nipissing, and Nehiyaw nations, who provided furs, corn, pottery, maple syrup, and tobacco.

Father Sun's pale fire had just ascended across the point where the land meets the sky when Akiwenzi emerged from his wigwam still sleepy from a restless slumber. He rubbed his eyes and stretched his arms to the side and high above his head before making his way to the treeline. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the full release of his bladder.

Standing on the bank of the eastern shore, Akiwenzi pulled his arctic fox cloak over his shoulders and gazed into the steely rapids. The waters reminded him of the loss of his parents, who had both drowned netting fish four season-cycles prior. They careened into a jagged rock and their canoe suffered a fatal blow. His parents were swept in the undertow, and never seen again. Just as the water provides sustenance for life, it also takes life away. From that point on, Akiwenzi had been raised by his grandparents.

In remembrance of his parents, Akiwenzi came to the shore every morning and made an offering to the formidable spirit of the water, Miishipiishu – who was known to be a moody entity that could spurn any unsuspecting traveller without a moment's notice. Miishipiishu had the power to command violent swells and capsize any seafaring vessel if he was not paid his due. Rarely seen but often storied, Miishipiishu was believed to dwell in the deep caverns of Gichigami's vast coastline. He possessed the likeness of a lynx with two horns affixed to his head. His imposing body was a burnt orange, with scales that shimmered aquamarine. A single row of pointed bone plates protruded along the length of his formidable back, cascading down to the recess of his gargantuan tail. Despite all his fantastic features, Miishipiishu was far more a force to be reckoned with than an extraordinary sight to behold. It was to this being that the Anishinaabe prayed for their safe travel on the water. Upon finishing his prayer, Akiwenzi reached into a leather pouch he had made the same summer his parents died, and sprinkled the tobacco into the

water. As he stood up, he heard light footsteps approaching him from behind. He turned around and saw Zoongdekwe.

Zoongdekwe was dressed warm for the overcast morning. She wore leather leggings underneath her breech, and was bundled up tight in a thick beaver fur coat. Her hair flowed free in the light breeze coming from the river. “Are you ready for your quest?” she said with a smile.

“I am,” Akiwenzi said. “I made my final preparations lastnight.”

“I made something to help you on your quest.” Without taking her eyes off Akiwenzi, Zoongdekwe unfastened her coat and withdrew a thin bone-coloured object that was about six inches long from her leggings, and presented it to him. Akiwenzi examined the item, and carefully unravelled the sinew that was bound around it. It was a whistle, made from the bone of an eagle wing.

“It’s beautiful, Zoongdekwe. Chi-miigwech,” Akiwenzi said, his face reddened.

Zoongdekwe found Akiwenzi’s bashfulness amusing. She looked into his eyes and smiled, as she leaned in to tie the whistle around Akiwenzi’s neck. When she was done, she stepped back and admired Akiwenzi’s beaming face.

Standing face to face for the second time in as many days, Akiwenzi struggled to rein in his carnal impulses. He imagined slipping his arm around Zoongdekwe’s waist, and drawing her against his body. He wondered what her lips and neck might taste like. His thoughts disturbed him; he knew they were impure. Be patient, he thought.

Migizii walked onto the banks of the great rapids, and looked at the sky and noticed that the clouds were receding to the west, zaagaate. It's going to be a favourable day, he thought. He wore a beaver fur tunic with a deer-hide belt fastened to his waist. At the edge of the well-worn portage trail, not more than forty paces from the shoreline, he could see his son, Okijita, receiving baskets of mostly beaver furs and weapons from Akiwenzi. The two were working together to load the canoe for the day's journey. It would begin with a two hour portage, followed by a three hour trek by canoe on Gichigami, to one of its distant islands. Vision seekers were expected to fast and pray for three nights while in pursuit of their vision. By mid-morning of the fourth day, the vision seeker would be relieved of his quest and be brought back to the community to discuss his experience. If the quest was successful, the vision seeker was free to carry out his purpose.

“Ahow,” Migizii said. “Are you young men ready to carry out this journey?”

“Yes father,” Okijita said. “The canoe is loaded and ready to go.”

“How about you, son? Are you ready?” Migizii said, addressing Akiwenzi.

“I am.” Akiwenzi said.

“Alright then,” Migizii said. “Let us begin.”

Okijita and Akiwenzi picked up the canoe in unison over their right shoulders, with Okijita at the bow and Akiwenzi behind at the stern. Migizii led the two young men carrying an eagle staff, the colours of the nation.



The portage was managed easily, with few black flies or mosquitoes to bother the veteran travellers. The cool spring air further aided their journey as to not be encumbered by the sweltering heat of the midday sun. The afternoon sun had sizzled away the remaining clouds, revealing a clear blue sky. Particles of white light danced on the calm open water. Once they were clear of the shoreline, Migizii began singing a travelling song to which the young men rowed in cadence to its tune.

By mid-afternoon the weary travellers had arrived at their destination. The island was hospitable with an abundance of cedar and birch, as well as a local population of spruce and pine. There were no four leggeds to speak of on the island, but plenty of hosts in waterfowl. Gulls nested on the rocky southwestern shore, while loons fished in the east. Kingfishers and woodpeckers were hard at work in the trees, constructing their summer residences.

After beaching the canoe, Okijita withdrew into the thick brush and did a quick survey of the landscape. Migizii stayed on the shoreline stretching his arthritic legs while Akiwenzi removed his belongings from the canoe. At length, Okijita returned with the news of his findings. “No one else has been here since our last visit. There are no tracks or markings to speak of.”

“Ahow,” Migizii said. By this time, he was sitting on a moose pelt he had laid out, with a few items assembled before his feet. As he was lighting a strand of sweetgrass within a hollowed out turtle shell, the young men joined him on the pelt. When it was lit, each man took his turn washing himself in the saccharine smoke. Migizii began the proceedings by wafting his hands over the smoke then draping it over

his face, grayed hair, and chest. Whereas Akiwenzi followed in the same manner, Okijita picked up an eagle fan and rose to his feet when he had finished cleansing himself. He then proceeded to waft smoke over the eagle staff, canoe, and immediate surroundings before dousing the ashes at the foot of a nearby redwood cedar.

Migizii bent his head forward with his eyes closed and uttered an imperceptible prayer before lighting his prized blackstone pipe. Facing the east, he inhaled a deep drag, then lifted his pipe and offered it to the spirits of that direction. He repeated the solemn practice for each of the other cardinal directions, before handing the pipe to Akiwenzi, followed by Okijita, for their turns to honor the spirits. When they finished smoking, Migizii looked towards Father Sun. “The day is getting late,” he said. “We should go, before it gets dark.”

It was customary law that no travelling take place after Father Sun had gone to rest for the evening. It was known that malevolent spirits roamed the landscape in search of prey. The most fearsome of these was Windigo; a gaunt spectre with an appetite for human flesh. His emaciated frame would heave with each breath, exposing his rail-thin rib cage. When near the presence of others, Windigo hid in long cast shadows, bellowing like a screeching wind. His jaundiced eyes were sunk deep into their black sockets, accentuating the contours of his twisted teeth. The very sight of Windigo was enough to seize his victims with a paralyzing fear that rendered them helpless as Windigo devoured them whole. Although Windigo normally presided during winter, the season of famine, he was also known to strike in the hours of darkness.

When the canoe was packed, Okijita stood at its stern, waiting for his father. Before turning to leave, Migizii clasped Akiwenzi's right hand in both of his and asked, "Do you have everything you need?"

"Yes, I'm ready." Akiwenzi replied.

"Ahow," Migizii said. "May Gichi Manitou reveal your dreams to you with the clarity of the midday sun." With that, Migizii turned around and stepped foot into the canoe that was steadied by his favoured son, Okijita.

As Okijita pushed off and picked up his paddle, he called, "Be strong, my brother! We'll see you in three suns."

Akiwenzi stood at the crest of the shoreline with his right hand held high and said, "Baamaapii." He watched, as his brethren paddled away into the distance. Before they were out of sight, a whiskeyjack whistled its familiar song, signalling the time had come for Akiwenzi to truly begin his quest.

The first pangs of hunger struck Akiwenzi with a ferocity he had long anticipated. He had not eaten since the previous night's feast, which marked the beginning of his fast. It would be another three days before he was permitted to eat any food or drink any water. Akiwenzi set up his camp quickly, making efficient use of the remaining daylight. He selected a high ground, not far from a cliff some thirty feet above the water's surface. The wooded area was rich with cedar growth and a few standing birches. He first assembled the wigwam poles he brought from home, each slightly taller than his six-foot frame, and tied them together with a length of sinew. With the foundation of the wigwam erect, Akiwenzi wrapped a moose-skin canvas around it. Beads of sweat formed

underneath his armpits as he worked to weave foot long sticks into the canvas' ends to hold the makeshift shelter together. As always, he made sure the entrance faced the point of the rising sun.

Akiwenzi made his temporary home more comfortable by placing several cedar boughs onto the ground floor of the lodge. After laying out his bearskin sleeping rug on top of the cedar boughs, he assembled the inside of his living quarters with the rest of his travel kit – a couple of beaver furs, spare leggings, a spear and hunting blade, his pipe with a pouch of tobacco, fire-making tools, and his eagle whistle. He finished his preparatory tasks by fetching enough firewood to sustain him for the duration of his stay. The rains had yet to come this season, so all his wood was dry. By the time Akiwenzi had finished making camp, he was exhausted. Father Sun had already kissed the horizon goodnight, but the sky was still resplendent in his afterglow.

The day's journey, coupled with the labour of setting up camp, taxed Akiwenzi's weary body, especially his shoulders. This was his first significant journey since he and Okijita travelled up north to trade for furs before the snow fell. His body urged him to lie down and rest, but he knew his work was not yet done. He still had to make a fire.

Akiwenzi sluggishly assembled his tools and set to the task of making a fire. He tried in vain to not think about the searing pain in his shoulders as he attended to the task. Before too long however, he struck a spark that ignited the birch bark kindling. Relieved, Akiwenzi added some twigs to the burgeoning flame before placing a hardwood plank onto its core.

With the modest fire ablaze, Akiwenzi committed himself to one final task for the evening. He reached for his pouch of tobacco, and withdrew a sum that fit into the palm of his right hand. Sitting with his legs crossed and eyes closed, Akiwenzi held the tobacco before the fire and said, “Gichi Manitou, I am alone. Give me the strength to rise above my fears. I care not about my physical body, for I expect to bear the hardships of hunger and fatigue. I only ask that you bequeath me the spiritual solace to perform my duty at hand. I ask for this, knowing of your divine generosity and the love you have for our people.”

Akiwenzi opened his eyes, and released the tobacco into the fire. The sacred herb scintillated into an orange glow, emitting a wisp of smoke that ascended to the starry night above.

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The sky was a hazy purple. It was neither day nor night. A small flock of geese glided peacefully on the water’s surface, doing what geese do. But one goose, different from the rest, was on the shore doing a sort of round dance by himself. He didn’t have the grey coat of the others, or the familiar white throat. His coat was entirely black, from head to webbed foot. Alone on the shore, he flapped his black wings, dancing round and round in small circles.

One observant goose took notice of the black bird’s peculiar movements, and posed a question to his brother, “What do you suppose that crazy bird is doing?”

“I don’t know,” said the other. “Leave him alone. He is not one of us.”

“That’s true,” said the first. “But just because he doesn’t look like us, does that also mean we should drive him from our flock? Do we not have a responsibility to be sociable hosts?”

“Perhaps, but it is dangerous to mingle with others we don’t know.”

“If he were a wolf, I would agree with you – but he is a goose, just as we are.” said the first. He added, “Besides, there are many of us and only one of him. What harm could he possibly cause us?”

“Famous last words,” his brother muttered.

The first goose let out a haughty laugh, “Come,” he said. “Don’t be a worrywart. Let’s see what that goose is up to,” then made his way toward the black goose dancing on the beach.

The second goose felt uneasy about his brother’s cavalier manner, but was worried about his safety, so he followed him nonetheless. The other geese in the flock noticed their friends heading towards the shoreline, and decided to tag along as well.

The black goose saw the flock approaching him. Delighted with the unfolding events, he grinned widely, in a manner that geese have rarely been witnessed to do. As the flock drew near, he redoubled his dancing efforts – flapping his wings magnanimously, executing a series of pirouettes, with the occasional somersault added for good measure. Altogether, it was a grand spectacle; the likes of which the geese had never seen before.

Impressed with the display, the first goose called out to the black one, "Boozhoo!" he said. "What is that extraordinary dance you're doing?"

The black goose suspended his theatrics for a moment to reply, "Ah, Boozhoo! Welcome, welcome. Please join me. I am doing an important dance for God Almighty."

"For who?" the first one asked, unacquainted with such a goose.

"God," the black goose replied. "Please. Allow me to ask you a question. Do you ever get hungry?"

The second goose scoffed. "Of course," he said. "We're geese. We get hungry, we eat. That's what we do."

"Ah, touché." the black goose returned. "But allow me to pose another question to you," he continued. "What is it that you like to do most with your time?"

"That's simple," the first goose said. "I like to bask in the sun mostly. Although mating season is a fun time too."

"I like to dawdle on the pond," another goose offered. Most of the other geese nodded in agreement. There was a general consensus that these were all favoured pastimes.

"Naturally," the black goose said. "I enjoy these activities too." Before continuing, he scratched his bill with his wing then asked, "Suppose, I were to tell you that you could indulge in these activities without the nuisance of having to stop to eat, every time you get hungry. What would you say to that?"

The first goose pondered the query a moment before replying, "It's true. We do spend a lot of time eating."

Still unmoved by the black goose's posturing, the second goose interjected. "I don't know. I like the way my life is. I don't mind stopping to get something to eat whenever I get hungry," he said.

"No doubt," the black goose replied. "Eating can be a delightful experience. But there are those days when food is scarce, isn't there?"

"Yeah, I hate it when I can't find food when I'm hungry," a goose in the back said. Again, the others nodded in agreement.

The second goose sensed his quandary. If he acceded to the black goose, his flock could be in danger. If he denied the truth, he risked ostracism. "It doesn't matter anyway," he said. "It is what it is. We make do with the best we have."

"Ah, but that's my point," said the black goose, "is that it does matter, because something can be done about it. It just so happens that God, himself, has taught me a dance in which I don't have to eat anymore, and never get hungry. I learned the dance two season cycles back, and have not eaten one bite since. Imagine a life in which all you do is sing and dance, and bask in the sun. Isn't that great? And the best part of all is that I can teach all of you the dance too."

It was a compelling argument, to which most of the flock jockeyed for position and said, "Oh, that sounds marvellous! Teach me the dance. Please, teach me."



“Hold your tail feathers!” the second goose said. “Who is this God you speak of?”

“He is a dear friend of mine,” the black goose replied. “Sometimes, I even call him Father. He looks after all his children, even all of you.”

“Then why haven’t we seen or heard of this God before?”

“Well,” the black goose began. “He only reveals himself to those that believe in his presence. You have to have faith in him. For those who do not believe in him, they are shut out of his mercy and good graces.”

After listening patiently to the back and forth dialogue, the first goose re-entered the conversation. “So you say you can teach us this dance that your God has taught you? Then please indulge us. Be our teacher, and we shall be your pupils.”

It was a tremendous effort for the black goose to restrain his ecstasy; however, after a waggle of his tail feathers, and a brief stretch of his wings he said, “Very well. The pirouettes can be tricky, but if you lead with your front foot, spread your wings and spin, then step on your back foot, that should help.” He then demonstrated the pirouette for his audience, to which there was delighted chatter and broad approval.

The first goose, eager to display the command of his dexterity, attempted and executed a perfect pirouette. The others, in turn, each tried their wing at it, and proved to be adroit students too.

“Excellent,” the black goose said, clapping his wings together. “That’s very impressive. You all are such quick learners. It took me some time to master the technique, and here, you all make it look so easy.”

It was a joyous time. The flock was proud of their accomplishments. They congratulated each other, and were enthusiastic to learn the next lesson.

“Now,” the black goose said. “You need not concern yourselves with the somersaults just yet. They are just stylistic points, if you will. But what’s really important for this to work, is that you are able to perform the dance with your eyes closed. This part is absolutely critical.”

“Why is that so important?” the first goose asked.

“It’s just what God requires,” the black goose replied. “It’s a test of faith. I agree, it adds a degree of difficulty to the measure, but I can assure you it’s worth the trouble. It feels so good that you can literally feel the hunger leaving your body. Personally, I think it helps to let out a honk while you do it. It feels so liberating – it’s just a little trick I learned along the way.”

Before long, all of the geese were dancing round and round, and honking with their eyes closed. The black goose, in particular, was pleased with the progress he had made in such a short time.

When the black goose was satisfied that the others were thoroughly immersed in their activity, he spun around three times and transformed himself into another guise – a

human being. As he walked to the treeline, just a few paces away, he said, “You all are doing so well. Can you feel the hunger leaving your body?”

“Yes,” one goose replied, while still dancing with her eyes closed. “I’m not as hungry now as when I started.”

“That’s good,” the trickster said, with a sack in hand. “Soon you will have no hunger or any concern whatsoever.”

No sooner than the trickster had finished reassuring his unassuming prey, did he scoop her up by the neck, and wring it until she was dead. No one noticed a thing amidst the commotion of the geese honking to their hearts delight. The trickster buried the dead goose into his sack, and then selected the next dupe of his choosing.

Emboldened by the trickster’s praises of encouragement, the geese continued to dance round and round with their eyes wide shut. One by one, the trickster plucked the geese from their bliss, and shoved them into his now very heavy sack.

At length, the second goose grew weary of dancing around in circles. He noticed that the volume of honking was not nearly at the level it had been just moments before. He opened his eyes, and to his unreserved horror he saw the trickster holding his brother by the neck – dead. “What have you done?” he shrieked. “We trusted you!”

The remaining geese opened their delirious eyes and stopped the ridiculous dance. Each one gasped in terror at the macabre spectacle, then took flight from their assailant. But it was too late. The trickster had already collected his bounty, and had the foodstuff he’d need for a long time to come.

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A thin trail of white smoke receded skyward from the fire pit as the last of the burning embers turned into black ash. Across the water and over the coniferous forest, Father Sun appeared over the distant landscape in a deep orange blaze. A whiskeyjack diligently welcomed his arrival with a song to wake up the neighbours.

Akiwenzi stirred in his wigwam, and noticed the fire was out. Through a crease in the doorway he surmised that it was just past sunrise. He opened the flap wide to let in the light. Despite the promise of a seasonably warm day, it was a rather chilly morning. Akiwenzi fastened his cloak around his shoulders before heading outside to relieve himself. When he re-entered the wigwam, he built another fire for his morning pipe ceremony. As he worked, his mind danced on the memory of his dream.

With the fire lit, Akiwenzi stared blankly ahead, deep in thought. He reflexively reached for his hunting blade and sweetgrass, then cut off a small braid of the herb and put it into his turtle shell. Using the blade he had fashioned from the bone of a bear, Akiwenzi scooped a cherry from the fire and placed it on top of the sweetgrass. Upon smudging himself and his immediate surroundings, Akiwenzi discarded the ashes before sitting down to smoke his pipe. The dream continued to weigh heavily upon his mind. Such a peculiar dream, he thought. It reminded him of an old Nanabush tale he had heard when he was still just a boy. Could it be, he wondered. What was Nanabush trying to teach me?

Nanabush was a complex individual. His reputation was as layered as an ear of corn. Nanabush was neither man nor spirit; neither good nor evil; neither friend nor foe;

neither living nor dead. He could be a hero one moment, and a fool the next; a man, then a weasel; funny, then tragic. He was a transformer, a shape-shifter, a trickster. But above all else, Nanabush was a teacher. He was a teacher of history, geology, and zoology, but most importantly, he taught lessons of morality and justice. The lessons were encoded in the tales of his adventures which were as voluminous as the fish in Bawating. Such was the power of Nanabush's gift that not only did he recreate himself in every tale ever told, but no tale was ever told the same.

Even after Akiwenzi had finished smoking his pipe, the disturbing dream of the geese was still on his mind. He knew the dream was sending him an important message, but was not yet able to figure it out. Sitting in his shelter with only the fire to keep him company, he was reminded of his mounting thirst and hunger. He tried not to think of it, but each time he moved, the knots in his stomach tightened their grasp on his self-control. With two days left to go, Akiwenzi knew the worst was yet to come.

As the morning dragged into afternoon, Akiwenzi stayed fast in his wigwam. He maintained a solemn vigil, refusing to give in to the physical demands of his body. He concentrated on the people of his community and what his role was to be when he returned. His grandfather, North Wind, had a reputation of being an eccentric medicine man, but his knowledge of the customary healing plants was matched by few. It is said that North Wind received his name upon his arrival at Bawating by way of the north wind. He initially came in search of tobacco and corn, but decided to stay after meeting Akiwenzi's grandmother, Whitecloud. Their union was sealed after Whitecloud gave birth to a baby girl. Some years later, when Akiwenzi was born, North Wind pronounced that his infant grandson would one day be a great prophet – a declaration that received

little esteem in the community. Whitecloud remarked that the baby looked like a little 'old man', and thus Akiwenzi acquired his name.

As an only child, Akiwenzi grew up in Okijita's shadow. Their families were close, but the rivalry between the boys was fierce. Okijita, being two years older, consistently won all their good-natured battles; he excelled in communal activities like fishing and hunting. He even went on a war party when he was aged just twelve winters. It was this experience that earned him his 'warrior' moniker. Okijita was destined to become the community's next great leader. For his part, Akiwenzi was at ease with his relationship with Okijita. He understood the value in being humble and conducting oneself with honor and integrity. Unbeknownst to him, it was these very traits that endeared him to Okijita's younger sister, Zoongdekwe. Growing up, Zoongdekwe maintained a low profile in the community. She occupied herself with customary duties such as tanning hides, sewing clothes, seasonal trapping, and cooking. She always had an eye for Akiwenzi, but it was not until her fourteenth winter that he first took notice of her.

Two season cycles back, during the period of falling leaves, Migizii and Okijita went south on a trade expedition to secure provisions for the coming season of ice and snow. Akiwenzi was left behind to provide for the women and elders in their respective families. Following a successful hunt one day, Akiwenzi returned home with a doe strapped across his shoulders. With his grandparents out on the lake, and Bird's Eye Woman visiting family in the community, Akiwenzi was greeted by Zoongdekwe. Together, they set to work of skinning the kill and quartering the meat. In a moment of rest, Akiwenzi looked over to Zoongdekwe and noticed what a fine young woman she

had become. From that moment on, Zoongdekwe ceased to be Okijita's little sister in his eyes, and became the woman of his affection.

Akiwenzi's thoughts of Zoongdekwe receded as the afternoon gave way to twilight. Before long, Father Sun retired for the evening, and it was dark once more. Although the land was blanketed in shadows, Akiwenzi's lodge was aglow. The only sound to be heard was the crackle of his fire. The long day of fast and prayer had taxed his physical being. His energy was depleted, but he channeled whatever remained into one final undertaking before lying down to rest. Akiwenzi prepared a bowl of sweetgrass and lit it in the same manner as before. He then withdrew a handful of tobacco from his pouch, smudged it, and said a short prayer before depositing it into the fire. Next, Akiwenzi slipped his eagle whistle off his neck. He took it in both hands and held it over the smoke while saying another prayer. Finally, Akiwenzi presented the sacred instrument to the spirits of the east door by holding it directly in front of him, before blowing the whistle four times. For the spirits of the south door, he held the whistle out to his right before blowing it again four times. Likewise, for the spirits of the west door, Akiwenzi held the whistle above his right shoulder then repeated his measure. Akiwenzi was nearly out of breath when it came time to honor the spirits of the north door. He heaved hard as he held the whistle out to his left, but was just able to conjure up enough energy to carry out his task. In so doing, Akiwenzi had summoned those spirits to keep watch over him as he slept on the second night of his quest. No sooner than he put the eagle whistle back around his neck, did he collapse onto the bear rug and fall into a deep sleep.

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Grey clouds threatened overhead, blocking the light of the early morning sun. The surreal landscape was hushed in a blanket of white mist. Akiwenzi drifted down to the water's edge, intent on stealing a sip of its refreshing goodness. He laid his body out onto a large boulder, prepared to cup some water with his hand. Before he could bring the water to his mouth though, an eagle, soaring in a wide circle above him, whistled in the ethereal stratosphere. Akiwenzi looked out onto the lake and saw a silhouetted figure approaching him through the dense fog. The apparition appeared to be alone, paddling in a deliberately slow manner. The solitary figure stood in a long, thin vessel, the likes of which Akiwenzi had never seen before. As it drew near, Akiwenzi could hear the sound of the apparition's oar whishing through the water.

Akiwenzi backed onto the shore and waited uneasily for the spectre to land its vessel. The ominous figure wore dark, heavy clothes making it difficult for Akiwenzi to discern its features. As the vessel slid onto the pebbled shore, Akiwenzi greeted the visitor tersely. "Boozhoo," he said.

Nothing.

The spectre dropped its oar into the water without a splash, and stepped out of the canoe-like vessel. Although the apparition was merely seven or eight paces in front of him, Akiwenzi still could not make out its features, for it wore a hood that shrouded its face. The spectre let out a drawn out, muted groan, as it approached Akiwenzi with a slow, heavy gait. It barely lifted its feet off the ground, sifting the cold pebbles beneath its weight. Akiwenzi maintained his stance, determined to show no fear, yet beads of sweat began to collect on his back and shoulders.



Now, within only a few feet, the apparition reached its arms out toward Akiwenzi. With its gaunt hands exposed, Akiwenzi noticed the figure's long, yellowed fingernails, and took a cautionary step backward. Akiwenzi's stomach tightened with each passing moment. He was ensnared by the apparition's deathly presence. Just when he thought to run, the spectre lifted its hood and divulged a sickly pale face with open sores.

Akiwenzi recoiled in horror at the sight of the ghastly figure. His knees buckled in terror, causing him to fall to the ground. Unable to get up, Akiwenzi squirmed backwards on his backside and elbows, never taking his eyes off the spectre. The apparition's pallid face was riddled with scores of red splotches. Its teeth were brown with decay and indigo rings underlined its cadaverous eyes. Soon, another apparition emerged from the fog; then another, and another, until they were all around Akiwenzi, encircling him like a pack of hungry wolves. Each one wore the same type of dark, heavy clothes, unnatural to the land; all were beleaguered with the same sickness as the first. Then, in a moment of ecstatic frenzy, they lurched forward and pounced on Akiwenzi. Overwhelmed by the assault, Akiwenzi shielded his face with the crook of his arm, and slid into a haunting blackness.

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Akiwenzi opened his eyes with a start. There were no apparitions, no spectres, no figures, only the dwindling fire in his wigwam. It was still dark outside, even the birds were not yet awake. The dream was not strictly envisaged; Akiwenzi's back was wet with perspiration. He sat up, folded his legs, and immersed himself in thought. The images in his dream were not new. He had seen that pale face before, though this time

the visitor brought sickness and he had company. Akiwenzi fired up a strand of sweetgrass to relieve himself of the disturbing thoughts, but it was of no use. The vision had etched an indelible mark in his consciousness, and would haunt him until he was able to discern its meaning.

Before long, Father Sun climbed high above the trees and the day was born anew. Akiwenzi had spent the morning engaged in prayer, and for the first time in more than a day and a night he decided to withdraw from the lodge for a brief recess. His mouth was parched and his knees were weak from the fast. To help guide him on his short excursion, Akiwenzi picked up his spear and used it as a walking stick.

Dressed in fresh leggings and his arctic fox cloak, Akiwenzi ambled down a moderately packed trail to the west side of the island. The cedars and black spruce soon gave way to the shoreline and he stood atop a large jutted rock, gazing into the endless expanse of Gichigami. The wind was heavy, causing his cloak and shoulder-length hair to flutter behind him. He could see that Father Sun would soon cede and surrender his right to the sovereign skies to the intruding clouds rolling in from the west. The rains are coming, he thought. His solitude over the past couple of suns beset Akiwenzi with a feeling of loneliness. He was fearful of his dreams. He knew they were powerful, but more distressing to him was that he knew they spoke of some impregnable truth. He knew that he would have to seek out the answers of the questions laid out before him. Who were these strange visitors? Where did they come from? What did they want? Why were they here?

Akiwenzi returned safely to his shelter before the rains tapped the fertile land. It was still before dark, but the sky was pasted with smoked charcoal. Before retiring for the night, Akiwenzi assembled the upper flap of his wigwam in such a way that it would keep out the rain, but allow the smoke of his fire to vent. By the time he was settled, the hunger pangs in his stomach had reached a peak. It was like someone had driven a blunt wooden tool into his gut with all their might. The pain was blinding; he wasn't able to concentrate on anything. Akiwenzi resigned himself to lie down, pull a beaver robe over his shoulders, and listen, as the first drops of rain pelted the outer walls of his wigwam.

The rain finally poured down amidst the cover of night. The trees swayed and laboured in resistance to the relentless wind, but they did not break. With his cloak rolled up to support his neck, Akiwenzi lay on his back, staring intently at the dancing fire. Dance was not simply an action to communicate joy, hope, or pride; it could just as likely evince a myriad of other emotions such as sorrow, fear, and anger. On this occasion, the fire danced with ubiquitous efficacy, as it trembled timorously to the rhythm of the storm, casting cryptic projections on the walls of the lodge. Akiwenzi absorbed the cinematic experience, and began to think of his own life, its meaning and relevance into the grand scheme of existence. He was befuddled with memories of the past, understandings of the present, and considerations of the future. Unable to grasp hold of anything concrete, Akiwenzi slipped into a world of endless possibility.

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The quest had tested the limits of Akiwenzi's physical and mental endurance. Overcome with exhaustion, he lay peacefully in his bed as Zoongdekwe nursed him back

to health. She was kneeling by his side, and placed a russet clay jug to his parched lips. Before he drank, Akiwenzi asked, "Is this a dream?"

No answer.

Akiwenzi surveyed the room, and saw the familiar adornments of his abode back home. Dried meat hung on the cross-poles above, hand-woven baskets decorated the earthen canvas. He could smell the fragrance of cedar, burning in a pit to his left. "How did I get here?" he asked.

Zoongdekwe shushed him softly. "You must rest now," she whispered.

"I had such terrible dreams over there – just awful visions. I am afraid of what they might mean."

"It is out of your hands," she said. "What is to be, will be."

"Zoongdekwe, I have to tell you something," Akiwenzi said. "I'm in love with you. I want to be with you."

"What is to be, will be," she said again.

She's close, yet she seems so far away, he thought. Akiwenzi lifted his hand and reached out to touch her, but she faded away from his grasp. "Don't go," he said.

"It's not about us, Akiwenzi. It's about what's doing best for the people."

Akiwenzi was troubled. Something was different about her, something was amiss. He wanted to get up and confront her about his concerns, but his despondent legs would not cooperate. A feeling of dread washed over Akiwenzi, as little by little, the

sight, sound, smell, and feel of his home vacated the consciousness of his mind. Everything around him grew faint, seemingly merging together into a colourless void, until all that was left was Zoongdekwe, but even she retreated from Akiwenzi's view. He closed his eyes in despair, and when he opened them again, she was gone.

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The storm relented in the wee hours of the morning. Father Sun was hard at work, pushing the rest of the night's clouds away. The ground was wet, plastered with a thick, heavy mud. Okijita and Migizii sat in front of their fire on an eastern bank of Gichigami, talking, eating lastnight's catch of whitefish. The fish had tasted much better the previous night, when it was fresh off the fire, but provided adequate nourishment for the morning's meal.

The lake was still choppy, with some whitecaps in the distance. It wasn't ideal travel conditions, so Okijita and Migizii waited as long as they could before setting off, but it was important that they make it back to Bawating before dark, lest they spend a night in the company of Windigo. Migizii surveyed the water, then reached into his pouch and withdrew a sum of tobacco, and handed the pouch over to his son. "We should go. Let us pack our things and set off," he said. They then went to separate areas along the bank, said a prayer, and offered their gift to the spirits. Before long, they broke camp and headed onto the water.

The commute was arduous and took extra time, but Okijita and Migizii arrived safely at the Island of Dreams. Upon landing, Migizii directed Okijita to fetch some water, as they head up to meet Akiwenzi.

Akiwenzi lay motionless on his bear rug, nearly comatose. His mind was working, but his body had shut down. Migizii entered the wigwam and attended him, while Okijita set to work at constructing a fire. Migizii sat on his knees and put Akiwenzi's head in his lap, as he placed a small jug of water to Akiwenzi's lips. "It's all over now," he said. "You did well."

Akiwenzi weakly opened his eyes, and looked at Migizii. "The dreams," he said with a long break. "They were vivid."

"That's good," Migizii said. "You will have to tell us about them, but first you must try to recover your energy."

At length, with Migizii's gentle coaxing and the warmth of the lodge restored, Akiwenzi gradually regained consciousness. After taking in some water, Akiwenzi was able to eat dried blueberries and raspberries, and then finally, small pieces of fish. When he was ready to travel, Akiwenzi put his arm around Okijita's neck, while Okijita put his arm around Akiwenzi's waist. Migizii led the way down the hill.

Since Akiwenzi was not able to row, Migizii prepared a place for him to lie down in the vessel, while Okijita went back up to break Akiwenzi's camp. Akiwenzi watched listlessly, as the others made the final preparations for the voyage back home. He sat on a rock just a few paces off the shore, trying to keep warm. His thoughts meandered between the experience of his quest, and the uncertainty of the future. He was relieved that he had finally received his vision, but knew that a larger task awaited him once he recovered. It would be a task that required him to draw upon the limits of his intuition

and the knowledge he had gained from the quest; a task in which he would have to confront the visitors of his dreams.

It was nearly midday when the canoe was packed and everyone was aboard. Father Sun had scattered the clouds, ensuring that the sky was friendly once more. Okijita pushed off the Island of Dreams, and settled into an easy rhythm as Migizii began singing an honor song for Akiwenzi. They paddled swiftly, until they reached Bawating, the place of fast rushing waters.

**Chapter Two: Voyage**

Dampier's latest expedition was commissioned to last four months. It was to be a voyage to a village known by the Wendat as Ossossané, spanning several hundred kilometres from Hochelaga to the depths of Wendake territory, between lakes Waasaagamaa and Ouentironk. Trade commerce around the Great Lakes had always been a way of life for Indigenous peoples, but ever since Jacques Cartier first arrived, the trade market was at an all-time high. Dampier grew up on the docks of Marseilles, but came to Hochelaga as a young man twenty years prior. His naval experience from *La Royale* served him well on the colonial front, as he now head his own expeditions on Turtle Island.

Over the course of weeks in Hochelaga, Rioux – a young missionary – met and became acquainted with Dampier and his team. There was also Gilles Bertrand, who was an experienced sailor and colonial explorer. He had been on the continent for twelve winters. There was Etienne Lafayette, the commissioner's sixteen year old son, who was Daddy's eyes on the voyage. And finally, there was Avanthey, a second generation immigrant of mixed ancestry. His father came to Turtle Island as a single man, and like so many other colonial explorers, he took an Algonquin bride. Avanthey was fluent in a number of local languages. Rioux held high hopes of being invited on the voyage, so he listened to all of Dampier's tales of the *sauvages* with earnest.

Unlike the others in his company, Dampier loved to talk. He indulged Rioux's interest, and taught him all he knew about the Haudenosaunee, who he often referred to as "them *sauvage* Iroquois". As they were gearing up their flat bed canoe, Dampier said



“Them *sauvage* Iroquois, they have no loyalty. We make trade with them, and they go behind our back and make more trade with them British.” Upon uttering the word ‘British’, Dampier cleared his mouth with such force, that his contempt was observed by all.

Although Dampier did not possess much of a formal education, he nevertheless espoused strong political beliefs. He believed that if the French were to lose trade access in the Great Lakes, the entire colonial enterprise would collapse. “I didn’t come here for nothing. Them *sauvage* Iroquois ain’t gonna control the trade routes while I’m around,” he often said. Dampier made a point of obtaining trade commissions as deep in the bush as he could, even if it meant enduring hard portages, in order to discover new trade routes and establish northern alliances. He knew that it was going to be an arduous journey with many hardships and that he would need all the help he could get, so after Rioux paid some industrious and sometimes amusing company, it was not long before Dampier extended the invitation that Rioux coveted to join him. And then, sometime during the Moon of Blossoming Flowers the party of five set off for Ossossané. The voyage was convened through a northern river route with the help of several Wendat guides, and was completed in just over three weeks.

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Despite making exceptional time from Hochelaga, the voyage to Ossossané was laborious because of the many portages to cross with their heavy canoe. The men were tired and sore. On the morning of their arrival, their lead guide, Joutaya, told Avanthey that they were near the destination upon the group’s arrival at the east bank of

Waasaagamaa's shoreline. Even though Avanthey grew up just a couple of hundred kilometres east of Waasaagamaa, he had never been this far west. When he was young, his mother had taught him to honor the land with a gift of tobacco whenever he entered a new territory. He stepped onto the rocky shore and gazed into the expansive horizon that the peaceful Waasaagamaa provided, and withdrew a pouch of tobacco. "Creator," he said. "Thank you for taking care of me and my companions on this journey. I am humbled by the magnificence of your power, and in awe of your creation. Please continue to watch over us as we pass through this unfamiliar land." Avanthey then knelt down, and cast the tobacco into the cold water lapping at his feet. It was a brisk morning, so he put on another shirt before he approached Dampier and Rioux with the news of their progress.

"The lakes are huge here," Dampier said as he took a swig of brandy. "And then look at all the land, yet none of it is developed. It's sad. The *sauvages* don't even know how good they got it."

"I noticed that," Rioux countered. "The lakes here are enormous – bigger than anything I've seen back home."

Avanthey resented Dampier's descriptions of Indigenous peoples as *sauvages* and his constant need for validation. He kept his report brief. "Joutaya tells me that we're very near his home community," he said. "We should be there sometime in the afternoon."

“Ah, good man,” Dampier said, barely looking over his shoulder. “I knew there was a way around them damn *sauvage* Iroquois,” he said, and immediately resumed his conversation with Rioux.

Avanthey just nodded, and walked away.

At length, the party moved on and were within a league of Ossossané. They travelled in two large, tightly packed canoes full of crew and trade goods. Dampier, Avanthey, and Rioux rode in one canoe with two Wendat guides, while Bertrand and Lafayette rode in the other with four Wendat diplomatic emissaries. Upon first sight of the gathering of people, Rioux narrowed his eyes for a better view. He estimated a hundred wigwams scattered along the shoreline among several longhouses, which stood from a previous occupation. Dampier explained that each wigwam contained as many as fifteen people, while each longhouse lodged as many as sixty. Dampier figured there were probably two thousand people in total. Aquatic traffic was heavy in and around the hub; vessels were going this way and that. Although the spectacle far exceeded Rioux’s wildest imagination, he never lost sight of his divine purpose: converting the infidels to Christianity.

“Dampier, how do you know about these people?” Rioux asked.

“Well Joe here,” Dampier said, motioning his head toward Joutaya, “made a couple of trips to Mont Real. I met him and his father a couple of years back.”

At that moment, Joutaya turned around and said, “Ossossané.” He pointed to the gathering of people with warm pride.

“When Joe came this time,” Dampier continued, “he told us he wanted us to come back with him – and to bring trade goods. He said there was going to be a ‘special gathering’.”

“Does he speak Français?” Rioux asked.

“A little, but he talks best with Avanthey. Isn’t that right, Avanthey?” Dampier said, as he polished off a bottle of brandy. He belched, then wiped his thick auburn beard with the side of his hand before throwing the empty bottle over the side of the canoe.

Avanthey seethed inside, as he watched the bottle bob up and down in the water. How despicable these men are, he thought. They have no respect for the land. He turned his head to take view of the now setting sun. He was reminded of some of the teachings his mother taught him when he was growing up. She told him stories about the land, and often said that without the land there is nothing. She stressed the importance of not only holding respect for people, animals, and all living things, but for the land as well. His companions though, were oblivious to his values since they viewed the land as an opportunity ready to be exploited. Again, he just nodded.

“How is that you can speak to these people?” Rioux asked.

Avanthey cast a reticent gaze on Rioux. “I speak Algonquin, parts of a Haudenosaunee tongue, and English. The words of Haudenosaunee have a lot in common with the Wendake language. Many of the words are the same.”

Rioux was perplexed. “How is that possible? Who are these ‘ho-‘ or whatever you called them, and all these Iroquois and Huron people that is talked about?”

“It’s complicated,” Avanthey said. “The ‘Iroquois’ you speak of identify themselves as ‘Haudenosaunee’, and the ‘Huron’ call themselves ‘Wendat’. Yet everyone has a different name by which they refer to somebody else. I’ve noticed that there are different cultures of people that speak nearly a common language, but within each culture, there are variations of words. Words might have the same meaning, but are pronounced differently.”

“Is that to say all these infidels are related then?”

Avanthey coughed into his hand. He longed for peace and quiet, but that time would have to wait. “No I don’t think so,” he said. “The Algonquin tongue I speak is completely different from Haudenosaunee. No words are the same. Yet, I’ve noticed that the languages from the Algonquin country are also related. It seems that there are different languages, each with different dialects.”

“How extraordinary,” Rioux said to himself.

In the other canoe, Lafayette was on the receiving end of a stern lecture from Bertrand. “Under no circumstances are you to fornicate with the female *sauvages*. You leave them alone now, you hear? You remember what happened last time.”

“But Bertrand, I didn’t do nothing. Nothing happened.”

“You nearly got us killed! Does that not register in that thick skull of yours?”

In a previous expedition, Lafayette singlehandedly caused a diplomatic crisis when he entered a Haudenosaunee wigwam one night in a drunken stupor, stark naked. The crisis was narrowly averted upon Dampier’s pledge that the degenerate would never

return to the community. Bertrand now explained with great severity that sexual relations with female *sauvages* pose a significant health risk.

“I know that you’re young and you have certain urges and impulses,” Bertrand said, “but you can’t go around messing with these *sauvages*. They’re not like us. Just look at how different they are.”

“They’re not that different. They just have different skin colour.” Lafayette said.

“Let me tell you a story,” Bertrand said, with a glint in his eye. “A few years ago, I knew this one guy who was very much like you. Whenever he used to go into heathen villages, he would fornicate with as many female *sauvages* as he was able. Well one day, he woke up and was experiencing some discomfort in his man region. Within hours, the discomfort he felt turned into pain. His penis started turning colours, from red to a deep purple.”

Lafayette shifted uncomfortably in his seat, but continued to listen with undivided interest.

“Yes,” Bertrand continued. “His penis turned from red to purple. By the time he was ready to bed down for the night, his penis had already turned black. He said the pain was so excruciating that night, he hardly slept a wink. The next morning he woke up and noticed that there was some fresh blood on his underpants. When he looked down, what was left of his penis had crumbled off, and had been reduced to a fine black powder in his underpants. He keeps it in a bottle to this very day.”

“You lie!” Lafayette said, half-heartedly. “No such thing never happened.”

“Is that what you think?” Bertrand calmly replied. “I’ll introduce you to the fellow when we get back to Mont Real.”

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When the canoes were cast ashore, the party was greeted with much anticipation and curiosity. Joutaya and his cadre were immediately enveloped by family and friends amidst songs and laughter. The others, led by Dampier, were escorted along a worn path to one of the longhouses. DuBois scratched his neck and ears feverishly; he was already bothered by mosquitoes and it wasn’t even high season yet. By the time they reached the longhouse, the party had amassed an impressive following of onlookers, each of whom wanted to catch a glimpse of the fair-skinned visitors.

The foreign surroundings aroused an exotic, even wild, appeal in Rioux. He marvelled at the tamarack longhouses, gripping the vertical poles and testing their sturdiness. Rioux brushed his hand against the deer hide canvas and inhaled the musky fragrance, but was taken aback by the absence of modern technology. He noticed that most the Wendake tools were either made of bone or wood. Above all, he was amazed at the people’s dress. He was unaccustomed to seeing women walk around with their breasts exposed. Mon dieu, Rioux thought. Infidels. He relished the opportunity to preach the word of God.

Upon entering the longhouse, Rioux noticed that the two hundred foot structure had raised platforms along its sides, used for sleeping space. The party was guided in the direction of Joutaya’s father, Augussawa, leader of the ceremony. Several others were assembled for the guests’ arrival, so after a formal greeting, Augussawa gestured for

Dampier and the others to sit to the left of his brother in-law. Everyone did so, with the exception of Bertrand who chose to stand. Joutaya took his seat, as was custom, to the right of his father. Being a pleasant evening during the season of plenty, a couple of roof flaps were open. Particles of dust danced in the rays of fading sunlight as the formal greetings proceeded.

Dampier launched into his diplomatic entreaties with great splendor. He rose to his feet and removed the tunic from his stout body, exposing the tattoos on his bare, but hairy arms. "It is an honor and great privilege for me to be here today. My people and I travelled many days to bring gifts of friendship and goodwill," he said. Despite making fine gestures with his hands and executing a series of deferential bows, Dampier was not able to speak with such eloquence - his words were interpreted by Avanthey.

After ending his speech, Dampier knelt down and withdrew an object wrapped in a cotton cloth from his personal carrying bag. He unfolded the cloth then held up a splendid 1200 beaded necklace with both hands for all to see. The presentation had a great effect on the assembly; 'ooh's' and 'aah's' were audible among the forty in attendance. Spectators in the back leaned in for a closer view; even the normally reserved Augussawa expressed his delight with a smile and a nod of his head. Dampier then rose, and placed the necklace on a beaver robe before Augussawa's feet.

Augussawa picked up the necklace and placed it around his neck. He then motioned for his aides, one of whom came promptly. In a voice audible only to the aide, Augussawa gave stern direction. "Our visitors are endowed with great power. We must



provide them with honorable gifts, go to the back and bring some nice pelts,” he said. The aide nodded then quietly withdrew to the rear of the longhouse.

Turning his attention back to Dampier, Augussawa expressed his gratitude for Dampier’s gift with the help of his son, Joutaya. “On behalf of my people, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to our territory,” he said. “The Creator has been most generous to bestow us with such esteemed guests during our solemn ceremony. My hope is that we may have a long and prosperous friendship.”

Before long, Augussawa’s aide returned to his side with a bundle in hand. Augussawa laid the bundle onto the beaver robe at his feet, and revealed its contents. Dampier’s eyes widened with excitement at the sight of the furs. After singing an honor song, Augussawa presented the gifts to Dampier, whose cheeks tickled with delight. Dampier examined the furs; among a few standard beaver skins, there were four exquisite mink pelts, along with two equally impressive arctic fox furs.

“The beaver is nice,” Dampier thought to himself, “but these other furs are marvellous.” He noted the plush extravagance of the mink and arctic fox, and entertained thoughts of the high ransom he could command for such opulence back home. He conspired to get more, but for the moment, Dampier appeased his gluttonous appetite with the fish and roasted corn that was served after the formal proceedings.

Dampier and his crew spent their time mostly together, participating in all sorts of games, fishing, songs, and dances. Avanthey garnered high praise for his proficiency with the bow and arrow, while Rioux was playfully jeered for his ineptitude. Similarly, the Wendats found great fun at teasing the Frenchmen about their attire, particularly

Rioux's black robes. Rioux absorbed the friendly jests with good humor, intuitively understanding the need to uphold a benevolent character. While the others were playing games, he made a habit of engaging the children, buttering them up with shiny beads. Everyone enjoyed themselves, with the exception of Lafayette, who often complained that he was tired and bored.

Amidst all the festivities, there was trade. Dampier packed the canoes with lots of beads because of the gross return he could reap in furs. Axes, fishhooks, awls, and copper kettles were also discussed and negotiated for in the trade talks. Dampier collected a nice bounty of beaver, but was dismayed with the lack of coveted mink and arctic fox furs. Upon inquiring where the others might be found, Dampier was told that they were from the "Ojibway" country.

While out fishing with Joutaya and his brother one morning, Dampier casually asked, "Where is this Outchibouec country?"

"I think he called it, Ojibway," Avanthey said.

"Ojibbeway. That's what I mean."

Joutaya pointed north, indicating that if they were to meet the Anishinaabe, they would have to travel north several days. He then spoke Anishinaabemowin to demonstrate the manner of their voice. Dampier turned to Avanthey to assess his level of understanding of the foreign tongue.

Avanthey said, "It is very much like the Algonquin language I speak. I understand some words."

Dampier considered this bit of intelligence carefully over the next couple of days.

The Feast of the Dead is a ceremony that lasts two days, but the social gathering begins several days in advance. Prior to embarking on their trek to Ossossané, members of each Wendake community in the surrounding area dug up deceased relatives who passed away in recent years, since the last ceremony. The corpses were then placed into a fire, so that the bones could be disarticulated and put into a new beaver bundle. The most recently deceased were not disarticulated, as their bodies were mostly intact, so these were cleaned and put into new robes. Following this solemn practice, the people made their way to Ossossané by foot with the remains of their ancestors in careful tow. Finally, at the great feast in Ossossané, the remains of their ancestors came to rest for all eternity. The Feast immortalized the dead through song and ceremony, while celebrating the living through games and activities. It fundamentally united peoples, strengthened and renewed old family bonds.

After a formal banquet, large groups of people proceeded on a one mile trek to the grand ossuary. By midday, the ceremony had begun amidst the ripening maple and poplar leaves. Augussawa delivered a rousing speech to the two thousand in attendance. Soon afterwards, songs were sung, while men and women brought their loved ones' remains to the edge of the ossuary. Around the burial pit there was a raised scaffold that had additional poles and cross-poles upon the walkway used to hang bone bundles and presents. Gifts included: beaver robes, glass beads, iron knives, and copper kettles; items known to be of indispensable services in the afterlife.

After the bundles and presents were situated, representatives of each community stayed upon the scaffold. These individuals were tasked with the responsibility of honoring their ancestors and community by way of storytelling. While the stories were told, several people worked within the ossuary, lining the bottom and sides of the pit with beaver robes. Given its sheer size, the ossuary required forty-eight beaver robes at ten pelts per robe. Dampier was perplexed at the extreme expense of so many precious furs. Rioux, however, was delighted for other, more ambitious, reasons. Although the souls in the pit might be lost, he thought, it was a promising sign that the Wendats paid such devotion to the departed. He considered it a trait he could refine to suit his mission.

When the last of the storytellers had spoken, bodies were placed in their final resting place in the same manner as before. Grandmother Moon ascended high into the evening sky, and a grand feast was prepared, followed by more song and dance.

The sky was clear and there was a gentle breeze ruffling the aspen leaves. Tens of thousands of stars perforated the night sky with their brilliant white light. Various fires were alit, and kettles boiled in the vicinity of the ossuary. Most of the congregation stayed the entire night. Among a few others, Dampier and his company hiked the mile back to the shoreline. Along the way, Rioux considered the prospect of converting the Wendats to Christianity. “Ah, wouldn’t that be wonderful?” he exclaimed.

Dampier turned a curious eye to Rioux. He thought Rioux was foolish to think that he could suddenly civilize the *sauvage*, but he was smart enough to keep those thoughts to himself. “Maybe so,” he said, “but that will have to wait. We’re not staying here. We’re setting off for Chippewa country the day after tomorrow.”

Dampier's announcement roused the ordinarily quiet Bertrand. "What do you mean, Dampier? I thought we were going back to Mont Real."

"You is going back to Mont Real – and take the boy and the priest with you. Me and Avanthey are gonna head up north and try and see these Ojibwe *sauvages*."

"What about the furs?" Bertrand said.

"Take them with you and get a good price for them. Hold mine and Avanthey's share until we get back. We won't be longer than a month or two; this is just a reconnaissance mission." Dampier said with a smile.

This assured Bertrand somewhat, but Rioux was dismayed. "But Dampier," he said, "I would really like to come with you and Avanthey."

"That's impossible Father. It could be dangerous – you never know with these *sauvages*. You would just be another liability, God forbid. I don't want that on my conscience. It's better if me and Avanthey go alone. If things go well, you can come on our next voyage in the fall or next spring."

Rioux said nothing. He accepted his fate. As for Avanthey, he was not displeased with the course of action. He was glad to be rid of Lafayette's company, and always looked forward to any kind of adventure, even if it meant putting up with Dampier. In spite of his reservations about Dampier, Avanthey felt that he was generally pretty good at what he did, and whatever happened, they'd be safe. Dampier though, dreamed only of accumulating more furs, while Bertrand fretted about the lonely voyage back home with the priest and the boy. Everyone went to bed that evening with the day's

events on their minds – with the exception of DuBois, who rarely had anything on his mind. He scratched his skin until it bled.

When Father Sun bid the eternal horizon adieu the following morning, the burial ceremony resumed. Songs of mourning and sorrow were sung, as family members continued placing bone bundles and presents into the ossuary. With the last of the departed put in their final resting place, beaver robes were folded over the mass of bones, followed by mats, bark, and sand. Augussawa then gave a short speech, honoring the relationships of all in attendance, as well as those who were buried. He concluded his message with the announcement of a great feast of prized game, corn, squash, and berries.

During the feast everyone exchanged presents, celebrating relationships that were formed, remembered, and maintained. Baskets of food containing corn and squash were placed on top of the ossuary to aid their loved ones journey in the afterlife. As evening drew near, a long procession made its way back to Ossossané, then beyond. The French travellers were cordially invited to keep company with Augussawa and his family for the remainder of the evening. Stories from time immemorial were told; performance theatre with elaborate tales of virtue and heroic exploits was the event of the evening. At one point, Rioux made the entire assembly howl when he relived his adventure of first stepping into a canoe. He pantomimed lifting his robes, while simultaneously stepping into an imagined canoe, inevitably tripping over his robes when he reached for the gunwale to brace himself. He soon discovered that he was talented in the manner of charades, and made it a point to refine his skill for future use.

Dampier was up early the next morning. Keen on seizing a capital opportunity, he had already inquired about a specific route to locate the Anishinaabe before any of his companions were yet awake. He was convinced that if he were to become the first French trader among the Anishinaabe, he could amass incalculable riches from the fur trade. He hoped to begin the journey up north shortly after breakfast. Anticipating a formal leave-taking with Augussawa, Dampier saved a few of his best trade items for the occasion. Back in Hochelaga, he had commissioned several fine beaded necklaces knowing that the beads were essentially worthless, but the power of their diplomatic agency was priceless.

When everyone was awake, the night's leftovers with duck eggs and tart raspberries made for a sumptuous morning meal. Dampier rose to the occasion with a toast of his own, and presented the necklaces to Augussawa, his partner, and three sons. In return, Augussawa presented each of his guests with enough baskets of food to supply them on their long journey home.

**Chapter Three: Journey**

It had been three days since Akiwenzi returned home from his vision quest. Although he had almost completely recovered from the fast, images of foreign visitors bringing death and disease still consumed his mind. As Anishinaabeg clans from all around the territory descended upon Bawating from their winter hunting grounds for the spring fishing, Akiwenzi remained fixed in his lodge, unable to feign the happiness that usually accompanied the season of renewal. Outside his lodge, the community was alive and well, everyone was joyous to be together once more. New mothers carried their newborn babies in tikanagans, taking the time to introduce the children to family and friends. Men gathered around, singing and dancing, telling stories from the season's past. Seemingly overnight, maple, birch, and oak leaves burst to life with effervescent greenery. The sky was blue, clouds were white; birds sang and dogs barked; children laughed and cried, everything seemed to be in its right place. But for all there was to rejoice in, Akiwenzi knew danger loomed just beyond the horizon.

Since his return from the Island of Dreams, a strange force compelled Akiwenzi to head in the direction of the rising sun. He knew the visitors in his dreams would be waiting for him there. The conviction of this truth grew stronger in his heart day by day. Akiwenzi was not afraid of what these strangers might do to him, but of the terror they might reign on his family and friends, on his community, his nation. Thus, he resolved not to wait for them to come to him, but to go out and meet them face to face, away from the ones he loved and cared for most.



Akiwenzi was making preparations for his journey when Okijita entered his lodge with a serving of moose meat and dried raspberries. Okijita was fresh off a successful two day hunting campaign. He and another young hunter shot and killed a young moose with their bows and arrows. The moose was sacrificed, in order to be the main course of the evening's feast at which Akiwenzi would relate the experience of his vision quest.

"Aniin, my Brother," Okijita said as he walked in. He handed a plate of food to Akiwenzi, and said "my mother and Zoongdekwe made this plate for you, wiisi'nin."

"Ahow," Akiwenzi said, nodding his head with polite gratitude. He could tell the meat had just come off the fire. It was still steaming and smelled delicious. Before saying anything else, Akiwenzi picked up a strip of meat with his fingers and put the morsel into his mouth. "Mmm," he said, and licked his fingers clean.

Okijita smiled. He was pleased to see his friend healthy, and in better spirits. He then surveyed Akiwenzi's living quarter and said, "It looks like you're packing up again. Where are you off to?"

"I will head east when Father Sun rises again," Akiwenzi said. "I don't know how long I will be gone."

"Debewin?" Okijita said. He looked intently at Akiwenzi, gauging the severity of his tone. "What is the reason for this unexpected journey?"

"During my quest, I had visions of visitors from another land. I believe Gichi Manitou has willed me to go meet them."

"I 'll come with you then," Okijita said, matter of factly.

“No,” Akiwenzi said. “This is something I must do alone.”

Okijita understood the meaning of Akiwenzi’s words. He pressed him no further. Three season cycles back, when Okijita embarked upon his own vision quest, he had envisioned a time of famine and the disappearance of many four-leggeds. In his dream, loud thunderbirds pushed their way across the sky, faster and higher than any winged being ever known to exist. Great balls of fire exploded from their bellies, pelting women and children below. The dream foretold a time of unprecedented chaos and destruction, as people turned their backs on the community only to save their own self-interests and well-being. At the time, Okijita’s vision was heralded as a profound prophecy but it did not come to pass. In recent months, the vision had receded from Okijita’s consciousness, but the severe manner of Akiwenzi’s tone revived the ghost of that memory. A brief, but audible moment of silence followed as the two men reflected on their respective thoughts. However, like the reflection of an image in calm water that is dispersed by a stone, their thoughts rippled back to the recess of their minds when Okijita’s mother, Bird’s Eye Woman, called out their names to attend the evening’s feast.

Father Sun burned hot well into the late afternoon. Working in the shade of a maple’s canopy, Zoongdekwe cut thin strips off a slab of moose and placed them onto a meat rack. The leftover meat was to be smoked and eventually ground into pemmican. Although she was dressed lightly, in a thick, but loose fitting deer-hide breech and her summer moccasins, sweat formed on her brow from her labor. Her hair was tied back in a single braid, extending down to the top of her round buttocks. In between cuts, she paused to lift the back side of her blood covered hand and wipe the sweat off her brow. As her head turned to the side, she noticed Akiwenzi approaching her direction. Her

heart fluttered with excitement as their eyes locked on to each other, but she hid the open display of her feelings by affording him only a polite, demure smile before quickly resuming her task.

Akiwenzi too, was delighted to see Zoongdekwe. A lock of her hair worked its way loose from the braid and hung innocently in front of her face. He admired the fine complexion of her dark skin and the contours of her muscles as she worked. His body language mirrored hers.

“I am going on a journey tomorrow,” Akiwenzi said, as he took a seat facing Zoongdekwe. “I will be gone for a few days.”

Zoongdekwe slowed down what she was doing to give more thought to what Akiwenzi was saying. She put down the cutting-blade and dipped her hands in an earthen bowl, and washed them clean. In a measured step Zoongdekwe made her way towards Akiwenzi, and took a seat beside him. “Tell me what’s going on,” she said.

“Strange foreigners visited my dreams the other night,” Akiwenzi said. “I must go see who they are and what they want.”

“I see,” Zoongdekwe said, thoughtfully. “This world we live in is a big place. I think it is bigger than anyone has ever imagined. There are bound to be things we don’t know or can’t explain.”

Akiwenzi nodded his head. He had his head down, looking at the ground. Zoongdekwe nudged him with her elbow and said, “Look at those clouds up there.

Imagine all the things they must've seen with as high as they are, and the distant lands they travelled to.”

Akiwenzi looked up and watched a strand of cumulus clouds slowly make its way across the endless sky. He then looked down again, and turned his head to face Zoongekwe to say, “I've had such terrible dreams.”

At that moment, Zoongdekwe clasped Akiwenzi's right hand in both of hers, and placed it beside her heart. “You don't have to do this alone,” she said.

Akiwenzi could feel the blood pumping in Zoongdekwe's heart. His hand against her warm skin made him feel alive, but with a certain responsibility to uphold his honor, his integrity. “I do have to do this alone,” he said. “It is what is expected. It's what our people have done as long as anyone can remember.”

Zoongdekwe looked deep into the soul of Akiwenzi and understood his resolve. “Follow your heart,” she said. “If you do what you've been taught, Gichi Manitou will watch over you. I will be here when you return. What is to be, will be.”

*What is to be, will be ...* Akiwenzi had heard those words before. They echoed in his consciousness. More than ever, he was sure that his fate was out of his hands. He wondered if the child within his heart could overcome whatever challenge he might encounter on his journey. Akiwenzi knew that the future of his community was somehow linked to his dreams. He felt like an active bystander, confined to watch helplessly as the events unfolded around him, but he was determined to not go down standing idle. What was *supposed* to be, would *not* be – if he could help it.

Before long, the afternoon gave way to evening. In so doing, the sky absorbed a pinkish hue, then violet, before settling into a shade of cerulean blue. Grandmothers and grandfathers bundled up in fur robes, among other interested community members, made their way over to the ceremonial grounds for the evening's feast. As the people arrived, cedar boughs were placed on top of the bonfire to ward off mosquitoes with a suffocating smoke. Migizii gazed into the fire, and watched as orange embers swirled into an ethereal space above before withering into charcoal ashes and falling back down to the earth below. He laid out his pipe, tobacco, turtle shell, and sweetgrass among a few other items onto a bear rug before starting the ceremony. Of the hundred and fifty or so in attendance, about twenty-five individuals participated in the session, including Okijita and Akiwenzi.

Migizii cut off a braid of sweetgrass and deposited it into his turtle shell, while Okijita secured a cherry from the fire and placed it on top. After smudging himself, Migizii withdrew his eagle fan and brushed the smoke over the rest of his sacred items. When his father had finished, Okijita picked up the bowl and smudged himself and his own items before going on down the line to assist others.

The lighting of the pipes signified a merge, a bond, between the physical realm and the spiritual one. Everyone in attendance waited in silence as the carriers smoked their pipes, adding to the visceral experience in the dwindling twilight. From time to time, the carriers would raise their arms with their pipes aloft, as they concluded their individual prayers to Gichi Manitou and the spirits of the four directions. It was to these beings that the Anishinaabe owed their ways of life and seven core teachings; teachings that expressed love, respect, honesty, courage, wisdom, humility, and truth, all of which

were elemental in living a good life. During the pipe ceremony, children sat in their mothers' laps; some suckling the teat, others enjoying pemmican – but all were watching, learning, the path to the good life, mino-bimaad'ziwin.

“We are gathered here today,” Migizii announced, “to celebrate life, and a new beginning. Our children are a season-cycle stronger, while our old ones are wiser. It is the time of re-birth, and our people are strong!”

A chorus broke out through the assembly. Drums were beaten with wicked fervor. Torches were waved jubilantly.

Migizii raised both his hands to settle the crowd. “The day is upon us in which we must renew our old vows, and make our community whole and complete,” he said. “We must live for each other and not for ourselves!”

Again the people cheered.

“Now, let us eat and listen to stories of the seasons past,” Migizii said. “Tales of sorrow and fear will be heard, but let us remember that these are also stories of perseverance and courage. Mino-bimaad'ziwin!”

Throughout the evening and deep into the night, people told countless stories of hardship and adventure – some were classics from years past. By the time Akiwenzi had a turn to speak, all the children were asleep and Grandmother Moon was high in the sky. Before he spoke, Akiwenzi picked up his eagle whistle and blew it four times, just as he had done on his quest. Only this time, the whistles were elongated and more subdued. He put down the whistle and in a soft but resolute tone, he said “The other night, I had

dreams of strange foreigners. One took the guise of Nanabush, as he was in the story of the dancing geese. Except this Nanabush was not playful or funny; he was cunning and deceitful. He did not kill for hunger, but for his own personal pleasure. In this dream, I think we are the geese. And whoever this stranger is, I think means to deceive us and then do us wrong.”

The audience murmured amongst each other.

“Akiwenzi’s dream is very powerful,” Migizii said. “He is to be credited for having such foresight. I see great wisdom in his interpretation.” Migizii directed his attention to Akiwenzi and asked, “Tell us more.”

The assembly fell silent once again.

“In my other dream I was alone,” Akiwenzi began. “I was confronted by a Windigo.” He looked into the faces of the crowd, and could see that everyone hung on every word he said. All eyes were on him, not a word was spoken. He found Zoongdekwe, who was sitting beside her mother. She was leaning forward with her hands clasped over her mouth, and her braid flung over her left shoulder. The very mention of the word Windigo drove fear into the heart of everyone.

“He had pale skin, almost white,” Akiwenzi continued. “There were sores all over his face.” Akiwenzi brushed his hands over his arms and face for added effect. “Then there were many more; they all tried getting on top of me.”

A buzz erupted throughout the gallery. The audience was aghast at Akiwenzi's account of his dream. Migizii called for order once again. "Tell us what you think this means," he said.

Akiwenzi sat and thought for a moment. He crossed his hands in his lap before saying, "I am concerned about the sickness on these strangers' bodies. It was unlike anything I have ever seen before, and it was vile to look at."

Several conversations broke out about the sickness Akiwenzi described, but no one could recall ever seeing or hearing of such a thing. When the chatter quieted down, Akiwenzi resumed talking. "The other thing that concerns me is how these beings multiply," he said. "They are like the fish in the spring. At first there is one, then two or three, but before long, there are hundreds, then thousands. I fear that they might overwhelm us and our territory."

"What are we to do when these beings come?" a woman asked.

"We must drive them out before they set foot on our lands!" someone said.

The assembly grew increasingly agitated; there were some who insisted that they should go out and strike the enemy that very night. Before the assembly spiraled out of control, however, Migizii seized order once again. "Baykah!" he said. "If these strangers are Windigo as Akiwenzi has said, they must be powerful beings. We cannot simply go out and hunt them down. We need to be smart and plan a strategy."

Much of the assembly acquiesced to Migizii's call for restraint, but others were not so easily pacified. These individuals called for an immediate plan of action. Others



still, were unmoved by Akiwenzi's words. These folks thought it was nothing more than senseless drama. "This isn't the first time we heard someone make such predictions of the future," someone remarked. "Three season-cycles ago, Okijita made similar proclamations. He got us all worked up about the end of the world being near, and just look! None of that came to pass. We are doing as well as ever. I don't believe any of this nonsense."

Several others seconded the disgruntled man's opinion.

Migizii was about to stand up and defend his son's honor, but Okijita held him back. "What you say is true," Okijita said. He was in a low crouch, leaning on his spear. "I did have a vision three season-cycles ago, and you're right – none of it came to pass. We should be so lucky that none of it did. But this does not mean that it can't happen or that it won't happen. We should be prepared for whatever challenge Gichi Manitou confronts us with. The fact that more of our people are having the same sort of dreams as Akiwenzi and I have had should be alarming. We have no business dismissing any knowledge that's been given to us. We need to take heed, and stand together!"

A raucous cry erupted in support of Okijita's words. The dissenters, meanwhile, sat quietly with their arms crossed. Migizii had trouble settling the crowd, until an old go'kum rose to her feet. She wore a mink shawl over her other garments, and her hair was fastened tight to her head. As a Clan Mother, she held a venerable reputation due to her life experience and her knowledge of the community and its laws, as well as its membership. She was responsible for the oversight of ceremony, as well as the adjudication of important council meetings, ensuring that the community's collective

interests were looked after. “I have listened, and I understand what all of you are saying,” she said. “The weight of such important circumstances will always have multiple, but equally valid points of view. It is difficult to know what to do. But if my opinion means anything, I think what these boys are saying is true. The old ones talked about such a prophecy many moons ago; they called it the eight fires.”

As go’kum continued to speak, the people stopped what they were doing, returned to their seats, and listened to her words. She spoke about the history of the people; of how it was said that the Anishinaabe had originally come from the big salt water far to the east, and how they had migrated west in search of food that grows upon the water. Along the way though, she said, the people lost their direction. She said there would be a time in which the Anishinaabe would meet a new people, as Akiwenzi had said, but it would be unclear if these new people would be friend or foe. The only thing that was certain is that their arrival would mark an age of unprecedented change. She went on to say that “the old ones” often talked about a point in the future when the Anishinaabe would be promised joy and salvation by the new people if they abandoned their ways of life. Many of the people will be deceived by these false promises, she said, and they will have taken their children away and eventually forget where they came from. Because of this, there will be a period of famine and tremendous hardship in the community, she said. It was foretold that only until a new generation re-traces the steps of their ancestors, and re-learns stories from their elders, a new age will be born. In that age, she said, the people will learn to find trust in the way of the land and the natural order of things again. “Our wisdom”, she said, “will be found in our dreams and stories”.

Go'kum paused for a moment to let her words sink deep into the consciousness of her community. When she resumed talking, all she said was, "The old ones, they always talked about how today's generation was formed by what was done seven lifetimes before us, and how our generation will shape what's to take place seven lifetimes into the future. Whatever we do, we must understand that the action we take today is going to have consequences on what will happen tomorrow. Be mindful of our children's children, and those little ones who are not yet here with us today. That is all I have to say."

When go'kum had finished speaking, all that could be heard was the crackle of fire. There was a certain chill in the air that cut deep into the people's bones. No matter how tightly they bundled up their robes, the feeling persisted. In that moment, Akiwenzi seized the opportunity to lay out his plan. He vowed not to return to Bawating until he saw the strangers' faces, spoke to them, and was sure he knew what they wanted. The decision was put to a vote, but after all was said and done, the community unanimously agreed that Akiwenzi could survey the situation based on the merit of his vision; however, if he didn't return by the season of falling leaves, a community alert would be put out, and council would be held again to reconvene the matter.

The feast had come to an end. Evening greetings were extended among all the people; soon after, many of the families retired to their own wigwams, leaving just a few people remaining at the ceremony grounds. Akiwenzi was one of them. After bidding several people goodnight, Akiwenzi tightened the braid in his hair, and walked over to Zoongdekwe. She was among a few women who stayed behind to help organize the leftover food. Akiwenzi studied her actions, and could tell that Zoongdekwe was more

downtrodden than her typically amiable character. He resolved himself to cheer her up by putting a smile on her face. Before too long, he was successful and the two of them were engaged in a light, but friendly banter. When Akiwenzi was satisfied that he had sufficiently lifted Zoongdekwe's spirits, he said, "I have something I want to share with you. Will you see me off tomorrow morning?"

"I'll be at the river at sunrise," Zoongdekwe said.

With that, Akiwenzi smiled and bid her goodnight. Although he had much on his mind, he slept peacefully that night, feeling very good about his love for Zoongdekwe.

\* \* \*

One drizzly morning during the moon of strawberry bloom, Dampier watched from the cold comfort of his tent misty rain fall onto the shore of Waasaagamaa. The disagreeable weather had extended for a third consecutive day and forced the party to make a camp at the mouth of a river. The river, as such, was made known to Dampier by his contemporary *voyageur* Étienne Brûlé, and was the source of a week-long portage between lakes Waasaagamaa and "Lac Nipissing". Dampier had promised his men that he and Avanthey would help them pass the portage before they made their detour off to the west, but it was an affair that he was none too pleased to undertake.

"I think this weather will keep us here for another night," Dampier said. He adjusted a blanket around his shoulders and told Lafayette to fetch some firewood.

"But it's raining, I don't want to," Lafayette said.

“I wasn’t asking you, boy. Get your ass out there and fetch some wood,”

Dampier snapped back.

Lafayette guffed about the inconvenience, but soon after picked up an axe and did what he was told. Being a dreary day with nothing else going on, Avanthey was amused by the encumbrance imposed upon Lafayette. He sat back and smiled, while Rioux who felt sorry for the lad said, “I’ll go help him.”

When he and Lafayette were outside and walked some ways, Rioux tried starting a conversation but Lafayette was hardly a willing participant.

“How do you like it out here?” Rioux asked.

“I’m cold and I’m wet,” Lafayette tersely replied. “I hate it.”

“But, isn’t this exciting and adventurous to you, being out in this wild territory?”

Rioux pressed. “Personally, I love it out here. I couldn’t imagine being in a more wonderful place. It’s so exotic.”

“I’d rather be at home.”

Neither the rain nor Lafayette spoiled Rioux’s mood any. As Lafayette proceeded to cut down tree after tree, and hack them limb from limb, Rioux took the time to jot some notes down. “Monsieur Javert,” he wrote. “What an extraordinary experience this has been! I must confess, the living situation is primitive, but the indians are a spectacle to behold. They are just like little children, all of them, even the adults. I showed them some beads, and I swear, I think they thought it was candy! It was the darndest thing. Anyway, I was writing to tell you that I came up with the most fantastic idea to convert

the little infidels. I am going to put on a play with puppets! I haven't figured out the language yet, but I figured there can't be a better way to simulate burning in hell. I plan to get the supplies and practice an act as soon as I get back to Mont Real. M. Dampier said I can come on the next voyage, which might be in the fall or the spring. I am so excited. I can't wait."

About the time Rioux finished crafting his letter, Lafayette had finished cutting up three birches - he spared the trunks from dismemberment, in favor of the branches. They collected the wood together without much trouble; however, upon their return to the camp, a testy argument ensued between Lafayette and Avanthey regarding the wood that was cut. Despite his best efforts, Rioux was unable to settle the dispute by himself, so he called for Dampier's assistance.

"What's going on out here?" Dampier hollered, clearly agitated. His pants were undone, and his white shirt was a mess. His auburn hair flowed straight to the back of his head.

"Avanthey is complaining about the wood I cut. I was just doing what you told me." Lafayette said.

"Is this true Avanthey?"

"What kind of idiot would cut down live trees for one night's firewood, or for any firewood for that matter? It makes no sense," Avanthey said.

All was silent for a brief moment, as everyone waited for Dampier's determination on the matter. Dampier took a close look at Avanthey and could see that

he was visibly angry, and another at Lafayette who was soaked through and positively confused. Dampier suddenly gave a hearty laugh and said, “Ah, you boys. Is this really what it’s about?”

“Well, yes,” Avanthey said. “This fool is cutting half the forest down for nothing.”

“Avanthey, look around you” Dampier said. “There is lots of trees. Who cares if he cuts down a couple of extra trees? No one is going to care. Ok? Relax.”

“As for you,” Dampier continued. He turned his attention to Lafayette. “Use that walnut sized brain of yours once in a while. It’s small, but I know you have one – so use it. Don’t go getting anybody upset for no reason, and don’t create anymore work for yourself than you already have. Stand up straight. Be a man.”

Neither Avanthey nor Lafayette was particularly pleased that in spite of their differences, Dampier sent them out together to find dry wood for the night’s fire anyway. But somehow, they mutually agreed to keep the peace for the remaining days they were in each other’s company. For the next six days the five Frenchmen trudged in a northeasterly direction with one seasonally-worn cargo canoe, and another lightweight craft. They portaged around low lying rocky shorelines and skirted through marshy landscapes on their way to “Lac Nipissing”. By the time they arrived there, the weather had completely cleared up, travelling was made easy, and everyone was in better spirits. They spent their last night together at the mouth of the Kichisipii, before Bertrand, Rioux, and Lafayette continued on to Hochelaga by way of the great river. Dampier and Avanthey bid the others adieu then head back the way they came in the lightweight

vessel. Dampier knew that if he waited until next summer to explore the area, his opportunity to establish a new trade route would be lost. His time was now.

\* \* \*

Several suns had come and gone since Akiwenzi left Zoongdekwe standing on the bank of Bawating. Even so, as he paddled along the north channel in search of the visitors in his dreams, his mind kept wandering back to the morning he left. He thought about how Zoongdekwe looked standing on the bank, clothed in her beaver cloak and shin moccasins; how quiet she was; her forlorn expression. Thinking back, Akiwenzi wished he had comforted her, or reached out to her, or did anything at all to demonstrate his love for her. But no, he let his bashfulness get the better of him, and an opportunity had slipped away. Now he was left to only wonder; wonder what it might be to have his arms around her, to have her body pressed up against his, to taste the salt of her skin. His mind writhed with remorse, thinking about the tears that welled in her eyes, and how he did nothing. *What am I doing?* He thought. *I don't belong here, I'm not ready for this.* Disconsolate thoughts swirled in his head faster and faster; thoughts of himself, his love, his community, his vision. Each passing moment seemed direr than the last. But just as Akiwenzi was going to give in to his despair, a shriek from high above shook him free. It was a sound he knew, that he welcomed. It was his spirit helper, the eagle.

Feeling alert once again, Akiwenzi landed his streamlined vessel in an unusually deep, rocky bay with high cliffs. He pulled his canoe up on shore, so as to not have it damaged by rocks if it should rock back and forth. Akiwenzi wasted no time pulling out his items and laying them out in a secluded space not far from the shore. Within minutes



he built a fire and proceeded to smudge himself down. He sat motionless for some time with his eyes closed, thinking about his purpose. When he opened his eyes, he looked across the strait and saw Manitoulin. A story of the island's history and its significance to his people immediately came to his mind, the story of Sky Woman.

\* \* \*

Long ago, maywin'zha, when the land was covered in water, a woman fell from the sky down to the water below. Many accounts say she fell, others claim she jumped, and others, still, contend that she was pushed. No matter how she came to be falling though, all agreed that a flock of geese rescued her from certain death. The geese, with much kerfuffle, formed a safety net with their wings and lowered the woman at a much more leisurely speed. Before long, the woman was gently placed on top of a giant turtle's back, sound asleep. News of the Sky Woman spread fast. From all around, many birds and different water animals came to look at her amidst her heavy slumber. The animals were drawn to her beauty; they had never seen an animal such as her before. They felt great pity and sorrow, for she was alone, from a different place. One day, she awoke, and was surprised to see such a cast of characters in front of her – there were clans of beaver, muskrat, otter, and an assortment of birds. “Oh dear,” she said. “How did I get here?”

“You fell from the sky,” a goose said.

“We saved you,” said another.

“Why, thank you,” said Sky Woman.

“And then they put you on my back,” said the grumpy giant turtle.

“Aww, I’m sorry about that.” Sky Woman said with a charming smile. To make Turtle feel better, she rubbed the top of his head ever so gently. It worked.

“If it’s not any trouble to you, perhaps you could take me to land and I’ll be on my way,” Sky Woman said.

“What is this ‘land’ you speak of?” asked Beaver. Others affirmed the inquiry by nodding their head. Some leaned toward their neighbor and said, “That’s just what I was going to ask,” to which their neighbor frequently replied, “yes, me too.”

“Oh, well it’s usually dry dirt, but I suppose it could be a rock or maybe a tree,” Sky Woman said.

“A rock or a tree? My word, who has heard of such a thing?” asked Crane.

“Not I,” mostly everyone said.

Just then, Turtle said, “I have heard of such a place. I have spent all my days, and many moons searching far and wide for this ‘land’, but have yet to come across it. I think it must be a myth.”

The animals expressed their concern for Sky Woman. “If there’s no ‘land’, what will you do?” they said. “Where will you go?”

It was a timely question, to which Sky Woman had no immediate answer. She considered the dilemma carefully and finally said, “If there’s no land to be found on the surface of the water, it must be underneath. Which one of you can dive the deepest?”

The animals talked amongst each other, but no one could agree who possessed such a skill. At length, Otter swam forward, and declared “I am flexible and I can maneuver my body any way I want. I believe I can find this ‘land’ you ask for.”

“Very good,” Sky Woman said. “Dive straight down, as far as you possibly can. If you should feel a wall that prevents you from going any further, that is land. Please bring a piece of it back with you upon your return.”

Otter nodded his head and dived straight down. He was underwater several minutes but when he resurfaced, he was empty pawed. He shook his head and said, “I tried my best, but I could not find the land.”

There was some deliberation that followed, but eventually Beaver swam forward and proclaimed her assets were suited to the task. She said she was bigger and stronger than Otter, and could dive depths he didn’t know possible. And within an instant, Beaver slapped her tail and disappeared.

At least twice the time that Otter had been underwater passed before Beaver finally resurfaced. She was completely spent and gasped heavily for air. When she finally recovered, she only said, “I found nothing. There is no land.”

For the next few hours, all those in attendance tried diving for land but the result was consistently the same. No one could find the land that Sky Woman was looking for. Her heart became saddened. She thought she might not ever see land again. Hope was nearly lost, that is, until Muskrat swam up and onto the giant turtle’s back to console Sky Woman. “Don’t cry,” he said. “I’ll try to do this on your behalf. I may be small, but I am resourceful and a hard worker.”

“Pfft. I am those things too,” scoffed Beaver.

“Yeah, and you’re not as flexible as me, nor are you bigger or stronger than either one of us.” Otter said.

Soon, the birds were jumping on Muskrat’s case. Loon pointed out that Muskrat was not as fast as any one of them, and that it would be an embarrassment if he were to even try to compete with the other animals’ skills. Much clamor and hazing ensued among the animals, each repudiating Muskrat’s frame and abilities. The mounting criticism was heavy to bear, but Muskrat said nothing more.

“Exaam’kamick! Leave him alone” Sky Woman said. The force of her voice drew the immediate attention of the animals. All was silent as they listened to what she had to say. “Each one of you has dived down to the very limit of your thresholds, yet none of you were able to bring me land. Now all of you dismiss this poor creature as being too weak, or too small, or even too slow, but let me ask each of you this: even if he should fail, how is he any different than any of you?”

The question hung in the air for some time, until Beaver apologized and sheepishly offered some words of support. Next was Otter, followed by Loon, until all the animals rallied behind Muskrat. The animals’ change of heart and sudden camaraderie made Sky Woman smile. Muskrat, too, felt the love. His confidence soared, matched only by his determination. “Miigwech,” he said. “I won’t let you down.” He then took a running leap off the giant turtle’s back and dove belly first into the water.

Minutes passed and there was no sign of Muskrat. The animals started to worry about their little friend. Then suddenly a series of bubbles surfaced near Otter. “What’s that?” someone said. “Is that him?”

“Um, no.” Otter said. “That was just me, a bit of indigestion.”

“Otter!” everyone groaned. “That’s not nice.”

“What? I can’t help it.” Otter exclaimed. “It’s natural.”

Down below, Muskrat forged to depths he had never been before. The water became black, and he could not see; the atmospheric pressure rattled his little brain, but still, he swam on. Then finally, without notice, Muskrat crashed into a wall of matter. The impact was so severe that Muskrat was concussed by the blow. He barely had a mind to reach for some substance before making his ascent back to the surface. As he swam, he looked up, and saw the faintest of light. Soon, the light became brighter and brighter until it was all he could see.

Up on the surface, it was a somber affair. Muskrat had been underwater longer than any of the others who went before him. Many of the animals had given up hope of his survival, and presumed he drowned. His family huddled together deep in prayer. When it seemed no longer possible that Muskrat could be alive, his body floated up to the surface, belly up. Beaver was the first to his side, and quickly deduced that Muskrat wasn’t breathing. Sky Woman then took Muskrat in her hands and pushed on his stomach several times. The animals held their breath as Sky Woman worked to revive his lifeless form. At long last, when it seemed all was lost, Muskrat coughed up some water and opened his eyes. “Here,” he said. “I found this.”

Just then, Muskrat opened his paw and emptied its contents into Sky Woman's hand. She inspected the tiny matter, and soon identified it to be a ball of mud. "This is it," she said. "You found it!"

All the animals cheered.

Sky Woman then placed the ball of mud onto the giant turtle's back and carefully kneaded it up and down. To the animals' amazement, the ball of mud grew in size. Soon it covered the whole of Turtle's back, until finally, the mud became land upon which all the animals could walk. In recognition of the giant turtle's service, the land became known as Turtle Island, and has been known as such ever since.

\* \* \*

Inspired by the stories of his people, Akiwenzi continued his journey with renewed confidence and determination. The days were long, so he fished at sunrise and moved during the light of day, scouring the shoreline for clues and possible answers. As he rowed past Manitoulin, he consequently arrived at the edge of his people's land. He knew that to the south was Wendake territory and further east, by river, was Algonquin land. He figured he would have to visit one, or maybe both nations to get the answers he needed. Having visited both places before, it was a reality he was comfortable with, since he was able to carry conversation in both tongues. His only concern was getting back in time to share his findings with his community.

On an otherwise dreary, overcast morning, Akiwenzi arrived at the river that bridged his people's land with the Algonquins. He had been to that territory several times in his life, but not within the past two full season cycles. Within moments,

however, he was able to identify the remnants of a recent camp just off the shoreline. The ground was packed and there were odd tracks all over the area. Akiwenzi deduced that the tracks were made by humans, being that they were the size and approximate shape of a human, but the markings were most unusual. The heel was prominently defined by a half-moon shape, whereas the forefoot was distinct unto itself. It was wide and deep, which left Akiwenzi to conclude that the men must be big and heavy. Upon closer surveillance, Akiwenzi noticed a couple of glass bottles strewn about the campsite. He took a whiff of one bottle and was alarmed by its toxic fragrance; he noted the different material the bottles were made of, but implicitly thought: *Who lives like this? What a mess.* Akiwenzi walked over to the fire pit and determined the ashes to be four or five days old. No one had been there since.

Before leaving, Akiwenzi did a perimeter sweep of the campsite as a manner of gathering more information. It was a relatively fruitless endeavor, until he came across three birches that had been butchered right beside each other. Their limbs were hacked off, with the trunks left to rot. The shameful exploitation was difficult to look at. *Who would do such a thing?* Akiwenzi walked alongside the fallen giants, carefully examining the wood chips on the ground. He kneeled down and brushed his thumb against the gaping gashes in the trunk. It was evident to him that whoever cut down the trees used a superior tool that was much sharper and stronger than anything he had seen before. There was no doubt in Akiwenzi's mind that the people who did this were the same people he was looking for. He took the time to analyze the tracks and was able to ascertain that there about four or five men, and that they were heading east to Algonquin country. He suspected that they were travelling in two canoes and moving at a slow pace.

Since these individuals were heading east, he figured, they must have come from somewhere in the south, from Wendake territory. After twelve suns, this was his only lead. He had to follow it. After a brief recess for lunch, Akiwenzi again packed his things and headed east, in pursuit of the elusive trickster.

Five suns came and went without so much as a hint of drama, but the landscape was eerily quiet, as if it had just been shamelessly groped and was embarrassed to speak of the affront. Akiwenzi figured he had gained a full day's travel on his quarry, and was now about three days behind. The Frenchmen had proved to be easy targets to track. They left behind a trail of waste and destruction that even the most novice of hunters could find. After a long day of travel, Akiwenzi rested on the edge of the riverbank under a row of pines, watching eddies swirl and merge, then drift downstream in an endless cycle of birth and regeneration. He purposefully selected spots some ways up and across the river to keep watch, knowing that men are creatures of habit – if they should turn around and come back, they would likely return to a spot they were already familiar and comfortable with. He wanted to be out of sight and out of reach.

As dusk turned to twilight, Akiwenzi prepared for his evenings' customs. Just as he stood up, however, he caught a glimpse of movement with the corner of his eye. He looked up river and saw a flash of white, immediately recognizing it as a wet paddle flashing in the evening sun. Suddenly his heartbeat thumped in his ears and a shiver ran down his spine. He was careful not to make any sudden movements as not to give away his position. From the shadows of the trees, Akiwenzi remained still as two men in a lightweight vessel rowed past, oblivious to being watched. Even from his distant vantage point, Akiwenzi marveled at Dampier's light skin and auburn hair. He was sure that this



was the man he had envisioned just less than moon cycle prior. When the strangers crossed a shallow bend, Akiwenzi circled back the way they came and crossed the river, then pursued them by foot.

Soon after Dampier and Avanthey crossed a clear-bottomed shallow bend, Dampier instructed Avanthey to pull over for the evening. He recognized the location as a place they had stayed before. It was getting late, so they wasted no time setting up a shelter and building a fire. When their work was done and they had eaten, Dampier was pleased with their efforts. “Good work today,” he said, while pulling off a big old dirty boot with a sigh of relief. “It’s much easier to travel with just two, isn’t it?”

Avanthey looked up for a moment to say, “Indeed, it is” as he was collecting his things from a coarse sack to bathe in the river.

“Okay,” Dampier said, already preparing to lie down. “Get yourself some rest. We got another big day tomorrow. I need you to be ready to go.”

“Yeah, ok. Goodnight,” Avanthey said, quite anxious to have some alone time.

A deep ocean blue had swallowed the coral sky and spewed a series of illustrious white stars by the time Avanthey walked down to the river. His shoulders and ass were sore from rowing all day in a seated position, but he was in a good place, mentally, nonetheless. He got undressed and allowed himself to get comfortable in the flow of the current so that he could relax his aching muscles. He closed his eyes and let the cool water rush over his body as he fell into a tranquil placidity. His bliss was rudely interrupted though, by a sharp prick on his sternum.

Avanthey opened his eyes, and jerked suddenly when he saw Akiwenzi standing over top of him with a spear trained on his chest. Like a rabbit under a lynx's paw, Avanthey was scared for his life, but knew there was nothing he could do. He let whatever was going to happen take its course.

“Who are you?” Akiwenzi said in Anishinaabemowin. “What do you want?”

“I am Avanthey,” he said, introducing himself in his mother's tongue. “My mother is Algonquin.”

Akiwenzi was surprised to hear the stranger speak a language he knew. He lifted his spear off Avanthey's chest, but kept it at the ready. “What are you doing here?” he said in Algonquin.

“We're traders,” Avanthey began. “We exchange furs for weapons and tools.”

“Where are the others?”

“We guided them to the Nipissing water. From there, they went back to Hochelaga. We stayed behind to meet new people.”

“Where did you come from?”

“Ossossané,” Avanthey said. “We met the Wendat. They traded with us.”

Akiwenzi studied Avanthey's eyes more so than his words, and became convinced of the truth. He immediately saw the implication of what it meant. If this man already speaks the Algonquin tongue, and his people made successful trade with the Wendat, then they've already become a wildfire that's scorched the land with their

numbers. Akiwenzi was disturbed by his sudden revelation, his will to fight vanished. He lowered his weapon, as he sank deeper in thought.

Avanthey noticed the change in Akiwenzi's countenance. Even though this man had threatened his life just moments before, Avanthey had no ill will towards him. He somehow understood that behind the bravado, Akiwenzi was acting on nothing but fear. "We are not here to hurt you," he said. "We want to be your friend."

Avanthey's words dispelled Akiwenzi from his reverie. Although he thought Avanthey spoke with a good heart, Akiwenzi hurriedly collected his thoughts as though they were strewn about the ground and laid bare for anyone to see.

"Show me these weapons and tools you speak of," Akiwenzi said. He allowed Avanthey to dry off and get dressed, then one behind the other, with Avanthey in front, they walked into the campsite. Both young men were nervous, not having the slightest inclination of what to expect. When they arrived, the fire was little more than a red glow. Avanthey called Dampier out of his tent, who could be heard grumbling from inside about the most sour inconvenience of being woken up.

When Dampier finally emerged from the tent, he was wearing a set of underpants and a scrubby linen shirt. His burly chest hair popped out from underneath his collar. He looked straight past Avanthey and at Akiwenzi's silver fox cloak and smiled. "Well done Avanthey," Dampier said. "I see you made a new friend."

Before long, the fire was livened and an array of axes, knives, cloth, pots, kettles, and beads were laid out upon a beaver robe. Dampier was in fine form showing off each item's specific purpose. He masterfully kept the mood light. His jovial humor put

Akiwenzi at ease. He was even successful enough to get Akiwenzi to try hot tea and brandy; however Akiwenzi did not like how the brandy burned his mouth and made his cheeks hot, so he only had one cup of the spirits. He recognized the toxic smell.

The meeting went on until the swallows announced the rise of Father Sun. The men were tired, but by the end, they had reached an agreement that they would meet again in the very same place during the moon of falling leaves. As a sign of good faith, Dampier gifted Akiwenzi an ax and knife, along with a length of scarlet colored cloth, and a steel pot. Akiwenzi, however, considered the gift too large to accept, so he gave them the only thing he had of value – his silver fox cloak. Shortly afterward, Akiwenzi went on his way back to his canoe, and the Frenchmen went directly to sleep. As he walked alongside the riverbank, Akiwenzi questioned if he had done the right thing, and wondered what his community would say. At the very least, he assured himself, he now had proof of the foreign visitor's existence.

**Chapter Four: Diaspora**

The dog days of summer had arrived in Bawating, and so did Akiwenzi. An immediate sense of awe and wonder reverberated throughout the community when he suddenly appeared over a ridge with his canoe slung over his back, one calm afternoon. He had been away for two full moon cycles, but was back sooner than expected. At this time, during the moon of ripened blueberry, many clans had left Bawating to reside in their summer camps, but of those who remained, they came out of their homes to greet Akiwenzi as news spread of his arrival. Some people remarked on the marked enhancements of his body; “Howah!”, they’d say – referring to Akiwenzi’s scintillating copper skin, or his broadened shoulders. Young women noticed his wild, flowing hair; they giggled with their hands over their mouths and whispered naughty jokes to one another. Despite the goodwill and attention he received, Akiwenzi was reserved, stoic even, focusing on making a presentation to his people.

That night, an unscheduled community feast was held. No one had hunted a moose or deer in the past couple of days, so the meal mostly consisted of whitefish, blueberries, and rice. In the usual fashion, the event began with a pipe ceremony. There were twelve carriers present, three of whom were boys that had just recently received their pipe. Migizii emceed the affair, but deferred the spotlight soon after his opening prayer. “Dear Akiwenzi,” he said, with a wide smile on his face. “Tell us about your journey.”

Akiwenzi sat cross-legged with his back straight and spoke loud for all to hear. “I have seen the face of the trickster in my dreams,” he said. “And I talked to him.” The

gallery was abuzz with a contagious zeal as he unwrapped and presented the proof of his claim. The men were particularly impressed with the ax and knife, while the women gushed over the scarlet cloth. As the items were being passed around, Akiwenzi resumed his account. “As you can see, these people are bestowed with great knowledge, but I beg you not to be so easily swayed by these trinkets. The items are nice. I am sure they will make our lives easier and more enjoyable, but at what cost?” he said.

The chatter stopped, and the mood turned quiescent, thoughtful, while they listened to Akiwenzi speak. “Men do not give things from the good of their heart, but with an expectation that the good deed will in some way be returned,” he said. “For these items alone, I had to give up my favorite fox cloak. I fear to think what we would have to give up, in order to enjoy these pleasures for all time.”

Several people nodded in agreement. “Perhaps we can manipulate them to our advantage,” someone suggested.

“That’s a dangerous proposition,” Migizii quickly interjected.

“What if we just ignore them and not do anything at all?” was also proposed.

“I don’t think that’s possible,” Akiwenzi said. “They have already traded and established alliances with the Algonquin and Huron. They told me they had come from Ossossané, so I went down there to confirm their story. I was told that they have been receiving more and more visitors with greater levels of incidence. I think their numbers are swelling.”

“What would you have us do then?” Okijita asked.

“I have made arrangements to meet up with them again in the river valley of the Nipissing.”

“When?” The people wanted to know.

“During the moon of falling leaves,” Akiwenzi said. “They said they would have more supplies and trade goods at that time.”

“And then trade with them over there?” Okijita asked.

“That’s what I was originally thinking,” Akiwenzi said, “but then I thought, what if they don’t show up? Or worse yet, what if it’s a trap, and I’m ambushed? Why risk losing our hard earned furs for nothing?”

The question hung in the air for some time before Akiwenzi continued. “I think it would be best if I went empty-handed, and find out if they keep their word or not.”

“And then?”

“Then, it’s up to us here to decide if we’re comfortable bringing them here and conduct the trade on our own land, on our own terms.”

“I like that,” Okijita said. “I think it could work.” He then turned to face his father, seeking his opinion on the matter.

Migizii remained thoughtful for a moment. He stared into the faces of the people around him, assessing their collective will, before saying, “It’s a good plan, but let’s not rush into a decision so quickly. Let’s think about this some more. I don’t like the idea of you going out there alone again.”

In the end, it was eventually decided that the matter would be revisited during the moon of changing color, when the community was back together for the fall fishing and harvest. The proceeding ended with heightened enthusiasm, many of the adults stayed behind to carry on the conversation in their own circles, while go'kums and sho'mus' shuffled the little ones off to bed. The novelty of the foreign items was on everyone's lips; their imagination had been reawakened, their fascination peaked – with it, Akiwenzi's caution became lost, like an arrow that had been shot then buried in dead autumn leaves.

Akiwenzi was both surprised and dismayed the reaction about his discovery was so immediate and profound. People whom he knew, but rarely talked to, approached him with questions about the visitors' dress attire and the type of water vessel they used. Observing Akiwenzi's discomfort with the maelstrom, Okijita provided some relief. "Ahow, mii'eyaa" he said, shooing people away. "He's had a long journey. Let's leave him alone for one night."

Eventually everyone abated. Okijita rose to leave, too, then turned and said "Are you coming?" His face shone in the moonlight.

"In a little while," Akiwenzi said. "I just want to sit here a minute."

"Okay, but hey," Okijita said, nudging Akiwenzi's shoulder. "Try not to worry about it too much. You did good."

Akiwenzi smiled. "Ahow, miigwech" he said.



When Okijita left, only Akiwenzi and the firekeeper – a youth, remained on the ceremony grounds. Akiwenzi sat motionless, staring deep into the northern sky, at Cassiopeia, with her thunderbolt likeness. *Have I brought destruction upon my people? Could I have done anything differently?* He untied his tobacco pouch, reached in, and grabbed a pinch that fit into the palm of his fist. “Erase these thoughts from my head,” he prayed to Gichi Manitou, then got up and dispatched the tobacco into the waning fire. Akiwenzi then draped the scarlet cloth over his right shoulder, collected his things, and made his way around the fire in customary fashion – counter-clockwise, to honor the ancestors of the spirit world, always exiting the east door. He bid the young firekeeper goodnight, giving him a sum of tobacco then made his way back to the lodge.

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Zoongdekwe watched Grandmother Moon make her slow descent to the western horizon from her seat on the keel of an overturned birch-bark canoe. In the two full moons Akiwenzi had been gone, hardly a moment passed when he wasn't on her mind. Now that he was back, she was so proud that he had done what he set out to do. Yet for all his achievement, she could see that Akiwenzi was not happy; he still had that certain fragility, that tragic vulnerability which consumed his being. It bored a hole straight through her heart. She longed to embrace him, make him feel safe, even if it was for one night only. And then, like a dream, he was suddenly there – beside her, as if he'd been there the whole time.

In a fit of unbridled passion, Zoongdekwe wrapped her arms around Akiwenzi's neck and pressed her face against his chest. Her joy of being in his company again was matched only by her fear of losing him. "I'm so happy you're back," she said.

Dumbstruck, Akiwenzi at first remained still, unsure of what to say or do. But then the smell of Zoongdekwe's hair, like early morning rain, and the warmth of her skin coursed through his body, sending spasms throughout his manhood. He instinctively wrapped one arm around her lithe waist, and pressed her head into the crook of his neck with the other. He stroked his fingers through her straight, black hair, and rubbed his nose and lips along her neck and ear. Zoongdekwe bit her lip and took pleasure in the foreign sensation that raised the hair on her skin. As she raked her blunt nails down Akiwenzi's concave back, he gasped in agony, in ecstasy. He then clenched a handful of her hair, and slid his other hand from her hip down to her ass. As he worked his fingers, he felt the heat emanating from her saturated loins. At last, Zoongdekwe exhaled a rapturous sigh.

Akiwenzi had never felt such ravenous want before. He picked his lover up and strode to the tree-line with her legs straddled around his waist. Using a long, leaning birch tree to his advantage, Akiwenzi held Zoongdekwe by the backside of her legs and made love to her until the last of his impulse was spent. When all was said and done, they laid on the ground in each other's arms, wrapped in the scarlet cloth, in an interminable bliss. They spent the rest of the night together, counting stars, imagining the future, whispering sweet nothings. Upon leaving, when the stars had vanished and the darkness retreated to the west, Akiwenzi put the scarlet cloth around Zoongdekwe's

shoulders and said, “This is yours. Keep it. Let it forever remind you of our union and what took place here this night.”

Zoongdekwe smiled, and gave Akiwenzi an affectionate hug. Before turning back to the still sleeping community, she said, “Miigwech, Akiwenzi.”

In the days and weeks that followed, the moon of ripened blueberries gave way to the moon of wild rice, and everyone was busy. Each year, the annual harvest brought the community together again until the moon of falling leaves, when families went back to their wintering grounds. It was a time to rejoice and celebrate the coming of manoo'min, the sacred grain. Nightly feasts were held to honor the occasion and spread word of important community events. It was during one such session when Migizii brought Akiwenzi's matter forth to an evening assembly and let him say his piece. Akiwenzi knew the time to act was near, for the leaves had lost their lushness and faded to the color of a citrus lime. He spoke at length about his vision and the encounter he had with the strangers from another land. “If we don't meet them, others surely will, and who can tell what will come of that?” he said as a lasting remark.

The assembly deliberated on the matter for some time, but in the end, it was predictably decided that the meeting would go ahead as planned. The only change was that Okijita would accompany Akiwenzi on the fateful expedition.

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On the way to the river valley where he and Avanthey had met Akiwenzi, Dampier managed to whip his men into a frenzy by singing their favorite cadences. They were in high spirits, rejuvenated from weeks of rest and handsome pay accrued from their

last voyage. “*Alouette, gentille alouette. Alouette, je te plumerai,*” boomed miles away up and down the river’s corridor – with it, every living thing along the way stared at them in wonder, perplexed by the bizarre behavior.

The landscape was now decorated a cadmium yellow with splashes of cranberry red, but Dampier’s keen eye still recognized the spot where the meeting had occurred early one afternoon. So it was that, after two weeks of hard paddling from Hochelaga, Kanien’kéha territory, Dampier told his men to stop. They had arrived at their destination. It was time to wait and see what the future brought.

When camp was made, Avanthey set out on his own to collect some firewood. His mind was restless and it fettered his brain. He walked along the shoreline, in the trees, stung by a certain unhappiness. In the midst of his wallow, a partridge flew in front of him and up onto a poplar branch not far above his head. He looked at the bird for some time, and was reminded of a time he spent with his mother, a happy time.

Avanthey remembered how he was just a young boy when his mother brought him along to check her rabbit snares one morning. Some time along the way, she stopped suddenly and put her finger to her lips, motioning for Avanthey to be still. She then pointed to a partridge up high in a tree branch, and retrieved some copper wire from a pouch she carried. Avanthey watched, as his mother searched for a long stick the width of her thumb. Upon finding just the right specimen, she quickly fastened a snare around one end then crept to a spot underneath the bird. Ever so cautiously, she raised the stick up until it was just in front of the bird, and then, with a decisive yank, she pulled down

and broke its neck. The bird's wings flapped furiously, but like a vessel with no driver, it went nowhere.

And now, with fondness, Avanthey recalled the ingenuity of his mother. In so doing, it also occurred to him why he was melancholy. He missed her, and that way of life, that connection to the land. With Dampier and the others, that connection was lost. They were part of a system that clashed with his values, something he didn't want to be a part of. He tired long ago of Dampier's pestering to learn Anishinaabek customs and values; he wondered why it was so important to him. Avanthey soon turned back to camp with a bundle of sticks in hand, and a new purpose in mind: if he could get away from them, he would. He wanted to make a new home somewhere, somewhere he could be free.

Around the camp, as the others either kicked their feet up or took a snooze, Rioux walked about until he found a spot underneath an oak tree along the water's edge, and set to work on his latest project: a picture book. It was still late-afternoon, so he figured he had at least another hour to draw another picture or two before dusk. Even though he used a graphite pencil to copy an image from his own pictured bible onto a parchment scroll, the task required Rioux to summon the very best of his drawing abilities to create a remote likeness of DaVinci's "Last Supper". To his satisfaction, it was to be one of his finer efforts, alongside his depictions of The Nativity and Crucifixion.

Rioux understood that it was going to take time to learn and understand any foreign language, but he also knew he could speed things up if he developed some effective visual cues. Whereas the charade and puppeteering jigs were meant to

demonstrate the differences between good and evil, right and wrong, and Heaven and Hell, he wanted the picture book to be a study of the life of Jesus Christ. Rioux felt it was important that his pupils received the holiest of educations possible, and in his mind, this was the best way he knew how to deliver it.

One week after the Frenchmen arrived at the river valley of the Nipissing, Okijita and Akiwenzi followed suit. Okijita happened to be in the front of the canoe and immediately saw dark smoke billowing over a crest of trees. He knew it was man-made; it only had a thin trail. “Exaam’kamick,” he said, with a laugh. “What kind of fool would leave a trail of smoke so obvious to see like that?”

Upon seeing the smoke himself, Akiwenzi was reminded how easily he had tracked the Frenchmen he met some months ago. “It must be the visitors from my dreams,” he said. “No one else would do such a thing.”

“Such a display though? For all to see? It doesn’t make sense.”

Akiwenzi said, “These people are different. Perhaps they don’t feel threatened.”

“You said there were only five of them though, right?”

“Yes, but who knows how many are with them now.”

When they were a comfortable walking distance away, Okijita and Akiwenzi stowed their canoe in a river line brush, then made their way to the camp by foot under an ashen sky. Both men were dressed in full, tough hide garments, while equipping themselves with hunting blades and medicine bags. They trekked the land quietly,

listening to the sounds of the forested hills. Off in the distance, whiskeyjack could be heard singing a song of lament.

Behind a ridge upright from the river, Okijita and Akiwenzi spied on the French camp for no less than two hours, watching the goings on with curious wonder. Akiwenzi pointed to Dampier and Avanthey, and related to Okijita that he knew them but not the others.

“Mooni’ya,” Okijita said.

White skin indeed, Akiwenzi thought. When he and Okijita determined that there were, indeed, only five Frenchmen in and around the camp, the young, but cunning Anishinaabeg diplomats curled back to their canoe.

For the past two suns, Dampier had spent much of the day at the river’s edge, struggling to wait patiently for Akiwenzi and his brethren. His men were growing weary of the wait. Lafayette was already asking questions like *How much longer are we gonna wait here? Are you sure this is the right spot?* The seed of doubt festered and itched Dampier’s brain until he really started second-guessing himself. He put serious thought into relocating the camp to a spot further down the river, just to be on the safe side. It was then that he saw the flash of water from Akiwenzi and Okijita’s paddles as they rounded the bend. At last, he thought, exhaling a sigh of relief. He then stood up and hollered a cry of joy. “Hooray!” he said. “They’re here!” and so everyone came down to the riverbank; each from their different locales in the camp.

Okijita studied the Frenchmen one by one as they filed down to the river. Even from several canoe lengths away, he was able to glean information from their stride and

posture; including their respective ages and size. In his estimation, Rioux and Lafayette posed no significant threat; to him, they appeared undersized and unskilled in the art of battle. He could see though, that Bertrand and Dampier stood almost a head-length taller than the other two. They were obviously much bigger men and would require an extra degree of caution. He thought the balance was tipped in the Frenchmen's favor, however, with the added presence of Avanthey. He was neither big nor small, but agile limbed and in peak physical shape.

Dampier greeted Akiwenzi and Okijita heartily, as soon as they touched down on shore. "Hello Akiwenzi. It's so good to see you again," Dampier said in the Algonquin tongue. "And who do we have here?" he said, referring to Okijita.

"Ah, you've learned more of the Algonquin tongue," Akiwenzi said, stepping out of the canoe. He then went up to Dampier and introduced him to Okijita. Upon meeting everyone else, Akiwenzi gave an extra nod and smile to Avanthey, to honor their previous acquaintance. Avanthey returned the gesture with a sum of tobacco for both Akiwenzi and Okijita to share. Seeing this, both Anishinaabe men were instantly put at ease; they understood it to be a sign of goodwill.

All together, the men moved from the riverbank to a stone fire pit just in front of Dampier's tent. At which time he ducked inside to retrieve a store of trade goods. He started off introducing Akiwenzi and Okijita to small stuff like beads and cloth, before working his way up to more salient items like steel knives and axes. But, by far, his greatest advance came by way of the musket. "This here, and a good knife, is all you'll ever need when you go hunting," Dampier said. "It is a powerful weapon, and much



more efficient than any spear or bow and arrow. If it is loaded and aimed correctly, and you press this button here,” he explained, pointing to the trigger, “you will strike your target dead instantly. It is like a controlled thunderbolt.”

As soon as Avanthey translated Dampier’s words for Akiwenzi and Okijita, they both stared at the musket in an awe-inspired disbelief, wanting to touch it and hold it and shoot it. Before long, Dampier loaded a round of buckshot into the muzzle and fired a shot into the trunk of an old oak tree some yards away. The Frenchmen laughed as the force of the blast sent the young Anishinaabeg tumbling to the ground, ducking for cover. Undeterred and in good humor about the prank, Okijita got up and asked that a round be loaded for him to shoot. Upon doing so however, he failed to brace his shoulder properly and fired an errant shot harmlessly into the tree line. Akiwenzi was given a try too, but he fared only slightly better.

In the evening, the weather was unseasonably calm and tepid. The Frenchmen roasted corn and heated up some leftover fish for dinner. Everyone talked and mingled until late in the night. To the benefit of both parties, the rendezvous was met with a sense of goodwill and cheer. So much so, that Okijita even participated in a firewater drinking contest between himself, Dampier and Bertrand. He quickly learned that the more brandy he drank, the more encouraged he felt, and the more the world spun, until he hurled a prodigal spew of corn and whitefish into the bushes behind him. Akiwenzi was alarmed at first, but was taken aback by the chorus of laughter at Okijita’s expense. When he saw that Okijita still maintained a good spirit, he let his reservations rest.

After Okijita and most the others went to sleep, Akiwenzi head down to the riverbank and laid flat upon a large boulder to wash his face and get a drink of water. As he bent down to cup water from the river, he was suddenly gripped with a powerful realization. The land and water looked just as it did in his vision – minus the fog. *Are those creatures with that sickness here?* The thought of them made his skin crawl with fear; his heart beat faster and faster, until suddenly, he was startled backward by the sound of Avanthey's voice.

“Mino-dibikan,” Avanthey said.

Hearing those words, Akiwenzi closed his eyes and lifted his head up. Just then, the faintest, warm autumn breeze brushed gently over his face, settling his fear. “Yes,” he said. “It is a beautiful night.”

Avanthey stood at the base of the shore, a canoe length from Akiwenzi, staring straight into the southern sky. He too wondered what the future held, but dared not say out loud. “There won't be many more nights left like this,” he said.

“No, I don't suspect there will,” Akiwenzi said. He looked at Avanthey through the corner of his eye, thinking about how he had almost killed this man. He thought about how unafraid Avanthey was to die, how calm and collected he was – under the circumstances. This one is not like the others, he thought. He thinks and feels just like us. The two men talked deep into the night, learning and getting to know one another.

The next day, Okijita slept until well past sunrise and woke up in rough shape; his mouth was parched and his head was aching. He felt a fever coming on, and was in no

condition to travel. After breakfast however, it was decided that they would all commute back to Bawating together. So Okijita gritted his teeth and carried on.

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The last vestiges of living color, burnt orange and plum, barely clung to the birch and maple treetops when the mixed party, led by an ailing Okijita who had strangely not yet recovered from his drinking experience, arrived in Bawating one late-autumn afternoon. By now, the temperature had dropped several degrees and the land had taken refuge from the dry wintry air under a blanket of crumpled dead leaves. Okijita was cold too; he wrapped himself in a beaver cloak and coughed violently into his hand. His heart warmed, however, when he saw the familiar confines of his home territory. For the most part, he rode with Akiwenzi and Rioux, while Dampier and the others managed in a cargo canoe of their own. As the party rounded a bend, they were spotted by two young boys who were at the bank of the river. Upon identifying their uncles, Okijita and Akiwenzi, the boys raced up the ridge and notified the elders of their discovery. Shortly thereafter, a curious – but enthusiastic – throng of people emerged on top of the ridge to welcome their compatriots' arrival.

Bawating was merely a fraction the size of its spring congregation at this time of year; still, the ridge was lined with an ample sum of enquiring minds. Children stared at the newcomers from the comfort of their parents' domain, confused as to why their skin was so light. Women, too, jockeyed for a better view behind a wall of strong and able-bodied men. The men studied Dampier and his crew, assessing whether they were friend or foe, but such a determination was confounded by Dampier's infectious smile.

“Boozhoo,” Dampier said, putting good use to the words he learned. He shook hands and pat shoulders with as many as he was able, as Okijita and Akiwenzi led him and the others through the crowd of awestruck people.

Rioux capitalized on the opportunity to win some hearts and minds. At every turn he dished out beads and strips of colorful fabric – red ones, violet, blue, and yellow. As he made his way through the mass of people, children circled back wanting more beads and cloth. He obliged until his bag was empty then carried on flashing smiles and warm handshakes. Lafayette and Bertrand followed next, mostly keeping to themselves but offering friendly glances into the crowd. Avanthey trailed, carrying a bag of trade items slung over his shoulder, politely nodding to the people every so often.

In the evening once the Frenchmen were settled in, a grand assembly was held at the ceremony grounds. They were invited to share their stories of who they were and where they came from. Drawing from his experience with the Wendat in Ossossané, Dampier once again related his good fortune to be in the company of such esteemed hosts, as he called them. With the help of Avanthey, he successfully expressed his desire to forge a trade alliance with his “newfound friends”. As he did in all the other communities he visited, Dampier presented gifts to the leader, namely Migizii, and the members of his family. But the second he laid eyes on Zoongdekwe, his world came to a smashing halt. She was dressed in long leggings with deer-hide mukluks, and a scarlet scarf over-top an otter-skin coat. Dampier fancied her immediately, craving to put his hands on her supple ass. When he stood in front of her, he reached into his coat inside pocket and withdrew a folded piece of ivory cloth. “This mon Cherie,” he said, unfolding the cloth, “is for you.”

Zoongdekwe quickly examined the item, and was impressed with the craftsmanship of the beaded, seashell and bone necklace. She smiled respectfully then took a long look at Dampier's physique. Never in her life had she seen such a burly man. His auburn hair and thick beard tickled her insides in an unpleasant manner. It made her want to pee. His shoulder width was nearly twice the size of any man she had ever met. The thought of being in his grasp made her want to shudder, to feel so frail and be broken like a twig. All she said though was miigwech and looked away. Dampier took her hand in his, bent down and kissed the top of her protruding knuckles. She fired a hot glare at him and pulled her hand away. Dampier loved the game; every second of it. Akiwenzi saw the exchange and seethed inside, but said nothing and did nothing. He only watched.

Of the other Frenchmen, only Rioux had an impulse to speak in front of the gathered crowd. On the way back from their rendezvous, Okijita had taught him how to introduce himself in Anishinaabemowin, which he spoke now to moderate effect. "Rioux indizh'nikaaz," he said. "Paris, France doh'jii." Several people nodded their heads, impressed with the effort. Rioux then talked about the "grapes and cheese" in Heaven - again with the help of Avanthey who, by now, was weary of the job of translator, - and some of the miracles performed by his savior Lord, Jesus Christ.

When the sky was black and the stars were bright, Migizii called an end to the proceedings. Much like Augussawa did, not so long before him, Migizii presented Dampier with a handsome collection of fur pelts, which Dampier accepted with the widest of grins.

The next few days passed largely in peace. Dampier mostly spent his time in the company of Migizii and the Heads of three other families, with Bertrand and Avanthey usually at his side. Rioux's puppet shows were a hit with the kids; meanwhile, Lafayette soon found love with a healthy woman about twice his size that turned his malfunction straight. Okijita and Akiwenzi, however, were conspicuously absent from most the events, for Okijita's health went from bad to worse and Akiwenzi was often at his side. The fits of coughing were like razors in Okijita's throat, causing swelling until he could hardly breathe. He could not eat, and barely drank any water; he lied down, bed-ridden, in a pool of sweat. When his skin erupted into bright red splotches, Akiwenzi recognized the illness as the one in his vision. He shuddered to think of what might come. A Windigo? Medicine men and women constantly traversed Okijita's bed, using sacred herbs to make ancient remedies, but nothing seemed to work.

Rioux, too, tried to lend a hand, fetching water and offering prayers. His heart caved with sympathy for the heathen infidels; he knew it was just a matter of time before more got sick. And when they do, he thought, these blind creatures will think God has summoned the devil upon them. Thus Rioux resolved to hold a sermon and set the matter straight, with Avanthey again being used like a mule.

It took Rioux four days to prep his notes and assemble an initial congregation of twenty-six; among those was Zoongdekwe, who had heard that Rioux's puppet shows were a must-see event. This time, however, Rioux spoke in an airy, solemn tone. "Disease is a terrible, terrible thing; it infests our bodies and dampens our spirits. But fear not! This pestilance can be defeated." he said. "It strikes those among us who have sin. Leave your vices and the corruption of your morals behind, and avow with us that

there is a true God! Pray for his mercy, and you will cease to be infidels.” When he finished talking, Rioux smiled and listened patiently as Avanthey tried to translate the gist.

“If this God is omnipotent as you say,” someone said, “then he ought to render himself visible, so that he may be recognized for what he is.”

“Dear sir,” Rioux began. “Just because you don’t see him, it doesn’t mean he does not exist. If you were blind, would you question the presence of the sun? Or would you believe those who see it, and accept the miracle of its gifts?”

After the sermon, Zoongdekwe made her way up to Rioux. She was enchanted by his rhyme and reason and in her despair to save her brother, she reached out for his guidance. “Can you help my brother?” she asked.

“My dear Child, your brother is a most unfortunate case,” Rioux said, shaking his head. “I know your sorrow. But if you truly want me to help him, you must allow me to baptize him.”

“What does that mean,” Zoongdekwe asked.

“It means we pour holy water on his head and say a blessing,” he replied.

“Is that all?” she said.

“Well no,” Rioux said. “You should do the same.”

Zoongdekwe was torn. Until now, all she had known was the ways of her people, the Anishinaabe. But what if this man is telling the truth, she thought. What if he can

help Okijita? “How can I be sure you’re telling me the truth about this God of yours?” she finally said, looking up into Rioux’s eyes.

Rioux stared ahead to think about how to answer the question, then returned her gaze. “Consider this if you will,” he said. “When we travel upon the river of life, we carry both our goods and our lives, so we take great care to protect them. But as others protect their belongings, I protect my virtue to God. My belief in God is my most precious wealth, and I dread sin more than losing wealth, because I know that if I have lived a good life, I will experience all the wealth that Heaven has to offer.”

The following day, it was discovered that another person was sick in the community. It was one of the elders who had been treating Okijita. Zoongdekwe sought out Rioux, found him, and declared: “My life is in your hands. Teach me the ways of your God.”

“Very well,” Rioux said, looking up from his bible. “When would you like to begin?”

“Right now. I’d like you to baptize me and my brother.”

Rioux was stunned at the suddenness of his breakthrough. “Certainly,” he stammered. “Let me just collect my things then we’ll be on our way.” Together, he and Zoongdekwe walked to the lodge where Okijita was resting.

Okijita was unconscious, but in stable condition. Akiwenzi was by his side. When Rioux and Zoongdekwe arrived, Akiwenzi exchanged greetings, then retreated to a far side of the lodge. Rioux went up to Okijita, loosened the rope around his cassock and



retrieved an ampule of holy water from an inside pocket. After dabbing a few drips of water onto Okijita's forehead, Rioux said a prayer to himself then made a sign of the cross with his thumb on the same spot. He then faced Zoongdekwe and said, "Your brother shall now be known as Joseph."

Next, Rioux motioned for Zoongdekwe to lie down in front of him. Her brain made her feel uneasy about letting a foreign stranger pour water on her head, but inside her heart, she put her faith into Rioux's practice.

When Rioux was done, he said, "As for you, your name will be Genevieve."

Genevieve sat up, put on a brave smile, and looked over at Akiwenzi. Although he did not like her decision, he knew it was her decision to make. He understood how much Okijita meant to her and her family. He knew that it was far more important for her to believe and have hope in Okijita's survival than give up and waste away in sorrow. He dared not to crush her spirit; he was there to support her. Albeit with a concerned expression, Akiwenzi returned her smile, compassionately.

"Remember," Rioux said, breaking a brief spell of silence. "You are a Christian now, and you must abide by Christian rules. Many people will try to come between you and God, but that's when you must have strength in your faith. To help you with this, you must learn the Lord's Prayer. Say it out loud and practice it day and night."

"I will," Genevieve said.

As the events replayed over in his mind, Akiwenzi was suddenly reminded of the artistry of deception and the ruthlessness of terror that the black goose had employed in

his dream. When Rioux had finished his hocus pocus, Akiwenzi immediately retrieved a coal and lit some smudge.

Over the next several days, Genevieve rarely left her brother's side, interrupting her prayers only to sleep and eat. She watched in muted horror as Okijita's rashed skin burst into painful pustules all over his body. Okijita rarely talked to anyone during this time, he ate only boiled blueberries and raspberries with ground medicinal herbs and roots. Elsewhere in the community, a young mother and her baby were also stricken with fever. Akiwenzi was growing increasingly distraught, unsure of what to do, but he fought bitterly to hide his fear and show a strong face. He continued to smudge and pray for the recovery of his people.

Finally, in the third week of Okijita's stay, his fever broke and fluid drained from his sores. His color and spirit returned to form, soon after the sores deflated and dried. Only now, his once clear skin was now scarred and pockmarked, a ghastly reminder of his brush with death.

"Praise be to Jesus! You're alive!" Genevieve said. "I was so worried about you. I prayed for you day and night."

"Wait a minute," Akiwenzi said in disbelief. "You don't actually think it was those silly prayers you said that saved him, do you?"

"What do you mean? Of course I do – without them, he would have died."

"I can't believe you're saying this. How can you turn your back on everything our people have done for him?"

“How can you deny the power of God?”

Akiwenzi stood shocked for a second; the riposte cut like a burning arrow straight through the center of his heart. He retreated outside the lodge, lest he say or do something he might regret.

In the days that followed, the sky was often a steely grey with a pale image of Father Sun. The leaves of deciduous trees had long since departed, leaving the limbs bare, reaching for the sky. By now, several others – all of whom were either very young or very old - were gripped in the throes of fever. It was around this time that Migizii developed a keen liking for the Frenchmen’s brandy, a fact that did not go unnoticed by Dampier.

One squalid afternoon, a group of men huddled and talked around a campfire. Dampier was among them, he had by now learned to communicate with the Anishinaabeg a great deal better than when he first met Akiwenzi some months prior. Earlier in the day, he cracked open a case of brandy and distributed bottles among those present. Even though the spread of disease was bad for business, he knew how to make things right. Booze and gifts had a way of bringing people around.

“Migizii, you are a good friend,” Dampier said. “This pestilence that has beset your community is a tragic affair. As a testament of my faith and good intentions to you, I want to give you a gift. Please accept this.” He then reached behind and withdrew a never-been-used buckshot musket from a hemp-woven sheath, and presented it to the group.

Migizii smiled, his cheeks flush with stupor. He was comfortably numb to all that was around him. The alcohol made him feel good. It let him forget about the troubles that ailed the community, his family. “You’re too generous, Dampier. What do you want for it?” he said.

“My friend, I want nothing from you, only your friendship.” Dampier said with his familiar wide smile. “Let us be allies,” he said. “Bequeath your daughter to me as a token of that friendship, and I shall offer my protection of you from your sworn enemies, just as I would have you do the same for me.”

Migizii humphed. “My daughter? Is that all?” he said. ““What about the others you undoubtedly made this same promise to?”

“What others?” Dampier asked.

“The Huron, the Algonquin, the Mohawks, you know, everyone.”

“Are these people not your friends?” Dampier said. “If not, declare them as your enemies, and I shall stay by your side. My allegiance is to you. Now will you solidify this pact?”

Migizii soaked in the idea with another swig of brandy. He turned and faced his panel of community members – all of whom had been drinking as much as he, and were in unusually raucous spirits. His head buzzed with uncertainty; he felt off-balanced from a clear state of mind. Despite the level of his insobriety, Migizii understood the enormity of his decision. “I cannot give you an answer on that just yet. This is something I will have to talk to my family about,” he said. “But as a testament of *my* faith and good

intentions to you, I would like to formally invite you to be our guests during the moons of ice and snow. The winter season is almost upon us, and it is not a safe time to travel.”

Dampier smiled and raised his glass. “Me and my men would be happy to stay the winter season with you,” he said. That night, everyone stayed up and drank until the case of brandy went dry. At which time, Migizii stumbled home, intent on settling the matter of Dampier and his daughter.

“Exaam’kamick,” Birds eye woman said, as Migizii barged through the flap of the lodge. She was wrapped in a mink shawl, sitting by the fire, repairing some worn caribou leggings with thread and needle acquired from Avanthey. “What’s the matter with you? Close the door. It’s cold outside.”

“Dampier just told me he wants to marry Zoongdekwe. And I think she should do it,” Migizii said.

“What? Why? Absolutely not. And my name is Genevieve now, I keep telling you that.” Genevieve said, incensed at the sheer audacity of such a suggestion. Lord have mercy, she thought.

Bird’s Eye Woman immediately stopped what she was doing, and made her way to Migizii to look him straight in the eye. “Have you been drinking that firewater again?” she said, sniffing the air. “Your breath stinks.”

“This is not the booze talking, this is me talking” Migizii said. He looked over at Genevieve and said, “You’re going to marry that man, and that’s final.”

“No way.” Genevieve said.

“What’s gotten into you, Migizii?” Bird’s Eye Woman said.

Migizii turned his attention back to his wife. “Do you realize what he could do if we say no?” he said. “He could declare us enemies and have all those eastern nations attack us. Do you want that?”

“But if we allow him to marry our daughter,” he continued, “then at least we have secured a fearsome ally, and gained some valuable tools and weapons.”

“And that sounds fair to you? Some tools and weapons for our daughter?” Bird’s Eye Woman retorted.

“I’m saying we don’t have a choice. We have to do what’s best for the people.”

“What’s best for the people, or what’s best for you?” Genevieve lashed out, before getting up and walking straight out the lodge.

Genevieve left her parent’s wigwam in such a tussle, that she broke into a near sprint to escape her madness. She scampered along the way with her head down, before running clean into Rioux. “Oof!” he said, as he spilled to the ground in a heap of black robes.

“Oh, Father!” Genevieve said, nearly in tears. “Are you okay? I’m so sorry.”

“I’m fine, it’s okay.” Rioux said, wincing as he got back to his feet. “But what’s going on? What’s the matter?”

“It’s nothing, I’m okay.”

“Oh come, Child! Don't be like that,” Rioux said. “Your place now is here with Jesus Christ, the Lord. Walk with me, tell me what troubles you.”

That evening, Rioux talked to Genevieve for hours, consoling her, trying to understand her plight. He listened as best he could, and was able to understand that her father wanted her to marry Dampier, but she, herself, loved Akiwenzi. He deliberated on possible scenarios, until an idea finally came to his mind. “If your father is so keen on you marrying Dampier, perhaps you can use that against him,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Genevieve said, curious.

“Tell him the only way you'll do it is if he agrees to convert to Christianity and he promises to help spread the word of Christ's teachings among all his people.”

“What about Akiwenzi?”

“If your father doesn't agree to do it, then you'll be free to marry Akiwenzi as you please,” Rioux said. “On the other hand,” he continued, “if your father does agree, then think about how many souls you will have helped save from the clutches of hell.”

“If I were to marry Dampier though, I don't think Akiwenzi would ever forgive me. I can't bear the thought of that. Have pity on me. What am I supposed to do?”

“Child, I only have two things to say to you,” Rioux said. “The first is, that you will never be a good Christian if you don't suffer many insults and calamities for your faith. When you first see yourself hated by any infidel, especially those who claim to love you, rejoice! Because that's when you are truly becoming a Christian.”

“What is the other thing you wish to tell me?” Genevieve said.

“The second thing is, when you experience that hate, take care not to be indignant at those who have made you suffer. They will say all kinds of horrible things, like ‘God is not real’, but pay no heed to that. Pray to God for them. Pray that he might show mercy to them; that he might enable them to understand the wretchedness of their lives.”

“Marriage is a solemn vow,” Rioux continued. “You must never give in to lust or temptation. These are vices spawn from the devil that must be completely purged from your life, lest you burn in hell. Only those who put God first and practice restraint will see the shining light of Heaven.”

“But Father,” Genevieve said, “why must God be so cold? If he loves us as you say, how can he punish us so?”

“My dear Child, pray.” Rioux said. “God is not cold. What you perceive as such, is only the depth of his love. If he didn’t love us, he wouldn’t care so much.”

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By mid-morning, word had spread abound about Dampier’s proposal. Akiwenzi had just finished his breakfast of wild rice and blueberries when he received the news from a young helper in the community. Without thinking, he immediately made his way to Okijita’s lodge.

“Have you heard about this?” Akiwenzi said.

“Of course. They won’t stop talking about it.” Okijita replied. He was busy sharpening the blade on his knife.

“So it’s true then. Is she going to do it?”



“It would seem so. What other choice does she have?”

“I’m leaving Bawating,” Akiwenzi said. “And you should come with me. Your sister too.”

“Leave Bawating?” Okijita said, perplexed. He looked up at Akiwenzi and studied his face. “This is our home. Why would you do that?”

“Our people are sick and dying from this disease they brought upon us. And the firewater is making them mad. It is our only chance to survive.”

Okijita brushed his hand against his pockmarked face and considered Akiwenzi’s point for some time. He thought about the illness he endured; how intolerable it was, how he sometimes wished he had just died. “And what?” he said. “We just get up and leave the one place we have ever known? The place that has been our home for generations upon generations? Where would we go?”

“Yes.” Akiwenzi said. “We move to a new place, where the food grows on the water – at the sandbar place, Zhaaqua’miigon, and we leave this pestilence behind.”

“And when would this exodus take place, I wonder?”

“Tomorrow morning, at dawn.”

“Howah,” Okijita said. “Be serious. The freezing moon is imminently upon us. That kind of travel at this time of year is unheard of. It can’t be done.”

“It has to. It is our only chance.”

Okijita rolled the idea in his head for some time. At length, he shook his head and said, "I just don't see it. Even with favorable weather and hard paddling, it will still take half of the moon's cycle to reach Zhaaqua'miigon. Very few people in the community would be willing to take such a difficult journey at this time of year. There just isn't enough time."

"Come with me." Akiwenzi said, but as soon as he did, he already knew the answer.

"The people need me here. Someone needs to be strong for them, and provide for them, and see them through these difficult times."

Okijita could see that Akiwenzi was upset; his head was down, deep in thought. "It's okay, you go ahead" he said. "You are doing an important thing here. You are ensuring the survival of our people."

"It sure doesn't feel like it," Akiwenzi said. "It feels like I'm running away."

"You would only be running away if you never came back," Okijita said. "That's not what you plan to do is it?"

"Of course not," Akiwenzi said. "I would come back in the spring, after the snow melts."

"Then go my brother," Okijita said. "Do what you think is right. I will see if there any others that want to join you."

"Like Zoongdekwe?" Akiwenzi said, lifting his head up.

“No,” Okijita said with a smile. “That one is up to you.”

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Upon leaving Okijita’s lodge, Akiwenzi set out to find Genevieve. He found her at the ceremony grounds in the company of Rioux, Avanthey, and a group of little ones. Beyond them, the pale overcast sky offset the stark blackness of the bare trees. As Akiwenzi walked up to the group, Rioux greeted him. “Boozhoo Akiwenzi! How good of you to come,” he said. “Are you here for a lesson?”

“Good day to you Father Rioux,” Akiwenzi said with a terse smile. “But no, I’m not here for a lesson. I’m here to see Zoongdekwe.”

“Please refer to Genevieve by her Christian name,” Rioux said. “Not her heathen one.”

“Around here, we name people by who they are and what they do. It is not some arbitrary thing you just assign people. Whether you like it or not, she will always have a strong heart; she will always be Zoongdekwe.”

“Ahow mii’eyaa,” Genevieve said, getting in between the two men. She turned to Rioux and said, “Please forgive me, Father. Allow me to take care of this. It will only take a moment.”

“Off you go then,” Rioux said, preserving his dignity.

Akiwenzi and Genevieve walked a few paces, to the tree line, out of earshot from all, but Avanthey – but even he had to strain his ear to hear what was being said. He listened as best he could.

“What’s going on?” Genevieve said.

“Are you going to marry this man, Dampier?” Akiwenzi asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t decided yet.” Genevieve said, unable to look into Akiwenzi’s eyes.

“How can you say that? What about us?”

“This is not about us, Akiwenzi. It’s about doing what’s best for the people.”

The wind was knocked clean out of Akiwenzi’s lungs; he could not breathe. A deafening ringtone overwhelmed his head and balance. The world around him bent and swayed, until he dropped to one knee – immobilized from the realization of his vision. He closed his eyes until he regained consciousness. At last, Akiwenzi stood up and said, “Our people are not safe. I am leaving here tomorrow morning at dawn. I would have you come with me, if you so choose.”

And then, Akiwenzi left.

After her conversation with Akiwenzi, Genevieve walked home sad and alone, unsure of what to do. A cycle of men’s words and beliefs rotated and maneuvered their way to the front of her brain; each claiming to know what’s best for her and the people. *Can I be with a man who does not share my beliefs? Or one who sees me as his slave?* At home, her thoughts consumed her appetite for both food and the bible, until she was weak and weary. She barely took notice of her mother.

“Dawnis, are you okay?” Bird’s Eye Woman said. She was working under candlelight, sewing a winter garb.

Genevieve could not lie to her mother. For her mother knew her better than anyone, and could plainly see her sorrow. “Mama, Akiwenzi told me he is leaving tomorrow morning at dawn.” she said, dejectedly.

“Debewin?” Bird’s Eye Woman said, feigning like she didn’t already know.

“And he wants me to go with him,” Genevieve said.

“Really? What did you tell him?”

“I didn’t tell him anything. He just left.”

“I see,” Bird’s Eye Woman said. “And now you’re wondering whether if you should stay or go.”

“What would you do?”

Bird’s Eye Woman stopped what she was doing and said, “As Anishinaabe’kwe, we have a duty to support our men. They fight on the front lines for us, while we cook and give them shelter. It’s the way it’s always been, and perhaps, the way it always will be. If you ask me this in public, I will stand beside my man and tell you to do as he says – because as partners, we *need* to have each other’s back. But as a woman, speaking to one of my own kind, who knows our intimate struggles with men, I would tell you to go; be free, with the one you love – because no one will ever make you happier.”

“But mama,” Genevieve said. “What about you, baba, and Okijita, and...”

Bird’s Eye Woman pressed her hand tenderly upon her baby child’s face. She stroked her thumb across Gevevieve’s cheek, and looked deep in her eyes and said, “Pray

for us, as you've always done. And visit us when the seasons call. We will always be here. Live a good life, mino-bimaad'ziwin. My precious dawnis."

The sky was still black when Akiwenzi got up to take a piss. His emotions were numb with resignation; he had spent a lifetime of tears in just one night. But now the time had come, and he was ready for anything. He put his belongings in the canoe and lifted it upon his shoulder and made his way to the water. As he walked by the other lodges, he saw and heard that no one else was yet awake. Aside from himself, only his grandparents and another couple with their teenaged daughters agreed to try the perilous journey.

At the river, Akiwenzi saddled his canoe and made way for the others. While he was waiting, he offered tobacco to Miishipiishu and Gichi Manitou. "Have pity on us, Mishiiipiishu" he said. "We are but humble people just trying to get home." And then he heard footsteps approaching from behind.

"Awiya?" Akiwenzi said, on edge. *Someone.*

"Do you have room in your canoe for one more?"

"Zoongdekwe!" Akiwenzi said, elated. "You decided to come?"

"Yes, but there's something you must understand," she said. "My beliefs are my own and you are not to judge me for them, whether you like them or not. You are to respect my opinion. Is that understood?"

"You have my word and my honor," Akiwenzi said. And they embraced.

Soon after, the others came down. As they were ready to set off, another figure

emerged from the darkness. At first, Akiwenzi could not make out the person's likeness. Was it Okijita, Akiwenzi thought. Had he changed his mind and decided to come afterall? Or perhaps it was Migizii or Dampier coming to claim back Zoongdekwe. But no, it was neither of them. It was Avanthey, and he had a single bag slung over his shoulder. "I overheard that you were leaving this morning, and I've come to see if you had any use for me."

Akiwenzi looked around and saw that aside from himself, there was only one other able-bodied man in peak physical stature to traverse three fully packed canoes. "Are you packed and ready to go?" he said.

"I am," Avanthey said.

"Then come. We haven't a moment to lose," Akiwenzi said.

And with that, Akiwenzi pushed off the shore of Bawating and followed the stories of his people, towards a new home, where food grows upon the water.

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