

Halfbreeds

By Elizabeth Russell

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PART I
YOUTH

Chapter 1 – The Bullbeast

The children ran as fast as their abnormally short legs would carry them to the edges of the Terrible Forest and there crouched among the brambles in the thicket. Once down, not a leaf stirred from place for these children were adept at making themselves invisible to human eyes. Bobakin lay still and silent, watching the townspeople growing larger as they neared, when from the other side, the forest side, something else caught his eye: a boy, quite close and quite conspicuous.

“Get down!” hissed Bobakin from the brambles. For the boy was obviously a Halfbreed, judging more by his ragged attire and mud-streaked face than his stature, for that, in fact, was rather good. Yet the boy, though he heard, did not immediately respond: there seemed an air of defiance about him in his straight back and fiery orange eyes.

“Get down or they’ll see you!” said Bobakin again, and this time the other boy saw the townspeople, quite near by this time, and the fire in *their* eyes, so he disappeared in the brambles as silently and swiftly as any magician.

Carl Drax, one of the leaders of the town, was ahead of the others and paused just before where the children hid. He surveyed the bramble patch with his stern blue eyes and handsome brow, seeming to meet the gaze of each fugitive there, before he turned away to look over the wheatfield across from them. It was a tall wheatfield, plenty capable of concealing even the tallest of their band but Carl could see nothing. He whirled back to the villagers, with their axes and pitchforks and knives, and declared that the “Halfbreeds have made their escape! For now.” Disappointed and grumbling, the people turned back to the village and went away. And Carl looked over his shoulder the way the Halfbreeds had gone, sure that wherever they were they would see the leer of hatred and resolve on his face, and know that they were not safe.

Bahia breathed a sigh of relief, and picked herself up from the thicket. “Bobakin,” she said – for he was the oldest and they all looked up to him – “what do we do now? Where do we go?”

“See here!” broke in the newcomer, pointing an accusatory finger at them, “You can’t expect to escape men if you’re all together. It’s only on your own that you won’t get caught.”

Bobakin saw some of the littler Halfbreeds’ eyes fill with tears, and in indignation turned on the naysayer, “We just did,” he said, “and we’ll do it again. There aren’t so many of us – only ten or twelve – and it’ll be no use being alive if we’re alone!”

All the Halfbreeds plucked up courage at that and grinned at each other. Even the newcomer shrugged his thin shoulders: maybe this tall Halfbreed had a point.

“But we can’t stay here,” said Bahia, glancing over her shoulder. The village huts were still in sight.

“But neither can we go too far,” said Nappy, who was an unusually short Halfbreed – shorter even than the children of the Schumps – and unusually bright for his eleven years. Everyone always listened when he had an idea. “If we keep going this direction we don’t know what we’ll find; it may even be the Schumps. And if we go into the woods it *definitely* will be.”

“Then what do you suggest?” asked Bobakin, and the newcomer was impressed to see someone so tall giving deference to someone so incredibly little.

“The lake. There are two of them and the villagers never use the smaller one on the backend. We’ll need water, and it’s as good a place as any to get it. The buildings there are all abandoned, some even say haunted, so not even the children will be out that way, running into us.”

“But it’s so *close*,” whimpered Fafolio, her brilliant orange eyes filling with tears.

“Would you rather be close to the Schumps?” demanded Nappy, and Fafolio shook her thick brown/green curls.

“Maybe the Schumps aren’t as bad as you all think,” suggested the newcomer coolly.

Before the children could react too strongly to that suggestion, Bobakin quickly interjected, “Alright, we’ll go where Nappy says. He’s right, you know. We have the best chance there. We’ll go through the wheatfield, where we won’t be seen, but stick

together or someone will be lost. Once we're on the other side, we make a break for the Rosenchans Barn. Everyone take a partner, and let's go." Then he turned to the newcomer, "Coming?" he asked.

"Don't know that you'd want me," he said defiantly.

"You're a Halfbreed, aren't you?" Bobakin asked him coolly, "You belong with us." Then he grinned, and said seriously, "Just learn to curb your tongue when the little 'uns are around."

So they made their way through the wheatfield.

Bobakin had been wrong in his estimation – having never taken the trouble to count the children – for there were seven in total. Yet if anyone had ever gone missing, he would have noticed instantly, knowing each child by name ever since most were barely old enough to toddle.

There was Bahia. She had been the first, and they knew each other best of the whole world. She was twelve with dark straight brown hair and stubby, bowed legs. Her eyes were the color of the sky at midnight, and her face ruddy and rosy: when not drained from hunger.

Next came Nappy, the smart, little one, with his owly orange eyes and short stumps of legs; his arms were just a bit too long for his body, which gave him a gangly look despite his short stature.

Then there was Fafolio who was holding tight to little Kaka as they made their way through the field. They were both from another village, a whole other world it seemed to the others, but were accepted unquestioningly since they too had been ostracized as Halfbreeds. Fafolio was nine with the orange eyes and green hair of a

Schump and the graceful figure of a lady, making her much taller than Nappy; and Kaka seven, with his wistful orange eyes that yearned for a mother he still remembered.

The last two were held fast by Bobakin and Bahia and were the littlest of the group: Bebbin and Brine. Bebbin did not look any way at all like a Schump with his yellow curls, brown eyes, and chubby little body not yet rid of its baby fat. Yet if one paid close attention, they would see that he walked different: almost as if he *were* bowlegged. But Brine was different and might have been supposed, had he not been witnessed to issue from a human mother, that he were a full blood Schump. He had been the first to join Bobakin and Bahia.

They had reached the edge of the wheatfield, and Bobakin looked out from among the golden stalks. The distance to the barn was only fifty yards: they could make it at a run. So everyone grasped tight hold of their partner and made off.

Then Kaka cried out: two farmers had seen them and were running their way.

“Run! Run! Go faster!” cried Bobakin, but what could they do? If they made it to the barn they were still discovered: there was no sanctuary and no means to defend themselves.

Then Bebbin tripped and Bobakin lost hold of his little hand. Bebbin was terrified and swerved, making for the animal pens. Bobakin cried out and went after him, but Bahia was faster – her skirt whipping behind her and her legs pumping like a locomotive, she screamed for Bebbin to stop. But the little boy was flying on the wings of panic and could not reason. He was already closer to the two men than to the other children.

He had reached the pens, which were chest high to a man, and vaulted over them. Even the men did not have the height or ability to do that and swerved to circumvent the fences. Bahia reached the first pen and started climbing it, Bobakin close behind.

The little boy seemed so possessed of a reckless disregard for all and anything that could harm him that he was heading heedlessly toward the pens on the outer extremities of the fields. These pens were known to the little boy in his more rational mind and normally nothing would have tempted him toward them, but now he fled there as toward life itself. Bahia knew where he was headed and tasted tears in her mouth though she did not know she had been crying them. Her whole heart ached with despair for his little life as she saw him vault into the pen of the Manticore.

The Manticore lay in his golden glory at the back of the fenced pen, sleeping. And when Bebbin landed inside, Bahia knew he was done for. The beast awakened slowly, and blinked slowly, and slowly raised his head, and by that time, Bebbin was through the pen, and into the next one. Bahia came to the fence of the Manticore and wanted to cheer when she saw Bebbin was through – but there were still the men. And she did not see what was in the very last pen.

When Bebbin landed in the final pen, his only thought – the thought that had driven him across the fields, over the fences, and through the pens – was escape. He *must* escape. He had run far, but still he had not noticed what he encountered – until he beheld the giant wall of the barn. It blocked his path, forming an insurmountable barrier and an endless partition to freedom. And so he stopped. Right in the center of the last pen.

Something growled close by. His little four year old body, breathless and shivering, quaked to hear it. He turned around and saw the Manticore: it was still asleep and in the next pen over. Then he looked around the pen he stood in and met the eyes of the Bullbeast.

The Bullbeast was unlike anything mankind had ever encountered before. Like the Schumps which resembled humans, the Bullbeast resembled a bull. But ever so much mightier and frightful, with tusks like a boar and a mane like a lion. It was vicious and would eat anything it encountered. Now, it stared at little Bebbin.

Bebbin stood a moment, frozen with fear beneath its gaze, until he realized that it had not moved. This was unusual behavior but the little boy did not stop to ponder it. He backed up and climbed over the fence on the side with the barn. Though the men had paused in their chase when they saw him enter the pen of the Manticore, now that he had gotten safely through, they advanced. And there were more men now, a quarter of the village it seemed, and they were all making their way toward Bebbin.

Then something even more extraordinary happened which caused the men to pause again. The Bullbeast, which had never been known to leave its enclosure before (or indeed able to), climbed the fence and alighted beside Bebbin. And Bebbin was not afraid. Cautiously, he put forth his hand and stroked the Bullbeast's muzzle. It licked his face and purred.

The men were in consternation and forgot all about the other children in their fascination with the beast's actions. Bebbin began to make his way around the enclosure – not away from the men as one might expect – but toward them, with his little baby hand nestled in the creature's mane. Two or three of the braver men

advanced toward them menacingly, but the Bullbeast raged at them so savagely that they retreated, and then it tamely nuzzled the boy. And he accompanied the child all the way to the path toward the barn, turning ferociously upon anyone who ventured near them. Bahia got off the fence of the Manticore and she and Bobakin met Bebbin there with the beast. Though the Bullbeast did not endear himself to them, he was not savage either, simply handing over his precious charge. Then, after seeing the children headed on their way back to the barn and the other Halfbreeds, the Bullbeast quietly returned to his pen.

The men did not dare follow the children after that. They decided anyway, to put it off for the time being. The Bullbeast's actions were peculiar and, in the minds of the villagers, a blessing upon the children – or a curse. For, to those superstitious folk, it was the same thing. The children were cursed and so were protected by a demon of a creature. There was no other explanation. If these simple people had known of the ancient human idea that the innocent, when abandoned by mankind, will often receive aid from the most unlikely of sources, they would not have given it proper weight to their situation. The children, for the time being, were blessed by a curse.

Chapter 2 – Schumps, Humans, and Halfbreeds

The Halfbreeds had been living in the Rosenchans' barn for a week, and everything was going well. Their first night, after the day with the Bullbeast, Bobakin had built a fire and everyone gathered around to enjoy roasted rabbit.

The newcomer found that he enjoyed the company more than he bargained, and was immediately accepted by the other children.

Brine sat himself down next to the new boy and offered his carrot, "Here, I don't need it so much – I'm liddler."

"How old are you?" asked Bahia of the newcomer, as she served out the rabbit.

"Nine."

“Truth!?” she exclaimed, “I’d have put you for older. You’re just ‘bout the human size for your age.”

“Sure,” he shrugged rebelliously. “But I’m a Halfbreed, all the same.”

“No one’s sayin’ you’re not,” said Bobakin. “What they call you?”

“Some’s called me Pincher. But ‘riginally I was called Denmin.”

“What’s pincher?” asked Kaka “That’s a funny name.”

Denmin-once-called-Pincher said, quickly and dismissively, “Means crook stealer thief.”

“Course yer a crook, yer a Halfbreed. It’s all the same.”

“No, it ain’t. Not where I come from. Only sometimes, when a Halfbreed is cast out. Then he’s reckoned to be a thief.”

Everyone was looking at him curiously, and he realized it was not the same for them. “Don’t you cast out Halfbreeds sometimes? Affer all, you’re all out here, running. You can’t be beggars.”

Bobakin leaned forward, curious and anxious to understand. He explained, “we can’t be beggars, you see. Because we’re Halfbreeds. We’re not supposed to be alive, even. So we run, so we’re not caught, so we’re not killed. That’s the way it’s always been: if you’re a Halfbreed, you’ve no right to live amongst humans.”

“Sure, I’ve heard that. And course if you’re a Halfbreed you’re less than a human, but that doesn’t mean you’re killed for it. Just cast out, or beggerin’, or vagabondin’. Truth is, you’ve got it nasty here, don’t ya? Man, I thought something wasn’t right when every folk I see is trying to kill me, but I just figured they reckoned I stole something big. That it would pass.”

“This here is our life,” said Bobakin, “and we’re the lucky ones, cause we’re alive.”

“Truth,” said Denmin, more as an exclamation than agreement; he was a bit overwhelmed with it all. “So,” he said, trying to understand, “when that man Carl came to our village, and started preaching his gospel of ‘humanity ‘gainst Schumps’, and his talk about ‘demons living amongst us’ and all, your village does it?”

“Sure. That’s the way it’s been long as I can remember,” said Bobakin.

Kaka snuggled closer to Denmin, “What’s ‘demons’?”

“I think it means Schumps,” the new boy told him.

“Course it does,” said Bobakin, “And they’re evil, worse than humans, cause humans are only evil to Schumps and Halfbreeds, while Schumps are evil against everything.”

Denmin looked at Bobakin with respect. There was something inspiring and intriguing about this tall lad with his brown/green curls and fiery firm hazel eyes. “So how come you’re alive?” he asked him.

When Bobakin was born, he was as normal as any other boy in the village, only rather bald. He had a loving mother and father and knew nothing of the evils of the world. Then one day, when he was four years old, he saw a child burned in the square. When he asked his father why, he was told that the boy was evil, “a Schump”. And by the way his father said that word, Bobakin knew he never wanted to meet a Schump. As he grew, he heard tales about the Schumps: how they looked, with their eyes the color of hell’s fire, hair the rank growth of green weeds, and short, stumpy legs that caused

them to waddle and hobble like a lame duck. Some of the villagers told ghost stories to the children, warning them that if they weren't good, they'd change into a Schump for their sins and be burned to death.

When Bobakin was five years old, his hair finally began to grow in; and one day, after he'd had a bath and was combing it before the mirror, he saw to his horror that his hair was green. Only a very small tinge of green in the muddy brown color, but it was there. He was transforming to a Schump for his sins, and would be burned.

Immediately, he ran out to the garden and rubbed mud all into it, to conceal his disgrace and keep alive. Miraculously, this trick worked, and Bobakin managed to keep his secret for three whole years, often forgetting his shame, and even enjoying life. He went to school to learn his numbers and letters and was a very bright child – far ahead of all the others in his class, though his teachers always complained of his dirty hair.

Then one day, and this day did not seem any different from any of the others, his mother walked by him and ruffled his hair.

“You're so dirty!” she laughed at him. “You always are, and no amount of bathing ever seems to get it out of you.” And on an impulse, she grabbed a jar of water and poured it over his head.

There was a ghastly silence, and Bobakin was afraid to look at her. When he did, her face was ghostly white. “A Halfbreed,” she whispered, and it was the first time he had ever heard that term, “my only son, a Halfbreed. I swore, I swore it was your father's I did – I swore you were. But you're not – you're a Halfbreed.”

“I will be burned?” he asked, with wide open eyes. She did not answer, but he saw the look on her face.

She ought to have sounded the alarm immediately, as they had done with so many children before, but right then she could not move. Bobakin saw that she no longer looked at him as a mother looks at her child, but as a woman looks at a frightening thing: a snake or a rat that has wandered into her kitchen. This gave him the courage to do what must be done – the courage to turn tail, then and there, and run away from home forever.

“And so I left,” said Bobakin, “I learned to live in the wilderness, on the outskirts of villages. To steal, hunt, fish, trap, anything to keep alive. I was all alone for a long time; until one day, I met Bahia. And then Brine, and slowly we’ve all come together. And now you’re here.”

“Your own mother would have burned you?” asked Denmin, shocked out of his aloofness and defiant independence.

“It was what she needed to do. But I think...I think she didn’t want to: that she wanted me to run away because it would be easier than seeing me die.”

Bahia took Bobakin’s hand sympathetically, “We are a curse on this earth,” she said to Denmin, “a curse on our parents and villages. But we run away because we do not want to die. That’s just the way the world is.”

After that they all went to bed.

Nappy, who had been Denmin’s partner through the wheatfield, offered the newcomer a space beside him on the ground, and they lay down together. They were the same age and were drawn together as children often are, by ties indefinable and unseverable, instant and lasting.

Denmin was thinking hard about Bobakin's tale. Finally he nudged Nappy, "Nappy, I've been thinking, and the Schumps are evil, right?"

Nappy opened his eyes, "Sure."

"But humans are good?" pursued Denmin.

"Yeah, probably."

"Well, if we're Halfbreeds, then we've half the blood of humans and half the blood of Schumps, so I reckon we're only half evil and half good."

"Say!" said Nappy excitedly, "I never thought of that. Yeah, maybe we're not all the evil we're made out to be. Would be a big relief to be good."

"Sure. And maybe, if we try hard enough, we can be gooder than the evil in us."

"Yeah," Nappy smiled, "Maybe."

The children, having spent their lives living on the outskirts of civilization, thieving and startling in fear of an axe or being caught for burning, now found their life in the old barn a comparative paradise, and made the most of it. With Bahia for mistress and Bobakin for master, with meat and vegetables every day, and time after chores for playing even, life could not be much better.

After awhile, with life establishing patterns of behavior and expectation, some of the children yearned for stable rules and published positions. They soon came to actually call Bobakin their Leader, and Bahia the Cook, and Nappy the Wiseman – for Nappy was always having good ideas.

One day, for instance, Kaka said to everyone at dinner, "We should have a Niceman."

“A what?” asked Bahia.

“A Niceman. You know, a man who’s nice. Who all the humans go to when they need help and are sad.”

“You mean a doctor?” asked Nappy.

“No. The one who talks once a week about being good and nice and punishment. Who people go to when they need comforting.”

“He’s right,” said Fafolio, “we had one in our village. He taught people, and gave advice, and helped others.”

“What, like sermons?” asked Bahia, dubiously.

“I don’t think so,” said Bobakin uncertainly. Sermons were tedious things.

“We don’t need sermons to have a Niceman. Just someone to go to when we’re sad,” said Nappy seriously. He liked this idea of Kaka’s. It sounded like a good way to put Denmin’s theory about goodness into practice.

“I go to Bahia,” offered Fafolio.

Nappy shook his head decidedly, “It can’t be a girl. I don’t know why, but it never is a girl.”

“But if we all already go to Bahia then isn’t that enough? Why do we need someone else?” asked Bobakin.

“Well,” said Nappy considering, “Maybe we can have two – a boy and a girl. We’ll have to vote on it.” Nappy was always putting things to a vote. Everyone agreed, and Nappy continued, “Right then, all in favor of having Bahia as the nice girl, say Aye!” A unanimous vote was given and now the question for the Niceman arose.

“Kaka’s nice,” said Bebbin.

“He’s too young!” protested Denmin, who did not favor approaching someone younger than him with his problems.

Bahia said, “I go to Bobakin when I have a problem.”

“Yes, but *everyone* goes to Bobakin when they have a problem,” said Nappy, “Cause he’s the leader. But what if *he* needs advice? Who does he go to?”

“But if he’s the one everyone goes to —“

Bobakin interjected, “No, Nappy’s right. It shouldn’t be the leader.”

“That just leaves Nappy and Denmin; everyone else is too young,” said Fafolio.

In the end they elected Denmin, since Nappy was already the Wiseman, and Denmin did not yet have a position. It was a strange choice, perhaps, since Denmin was not anyone’s first thought when they had a problem, but after that they approached him if Bahia was busy. And even sometimes when she wasn’t, for he soon began to show a natural talent for giving sage advice that probably never would have emerged had he not been elected to the position.

Thus life treats us sometimes.

Chapter 3 – A Troubled Heart’s Dilemma

“Bebbin!” called Bahia one day from the very top spine of the barn. She was looking far out over the fields and woods and hedgerows, to see if she could spot the four-year-old. He had been missing quite often lately and then showing up in the most unlikely of places, so she wasn’t too worried. But rules were rules if Nappy had proclaimed them and all children under eight *must* be in the barn after sundown. There was Kaka, tending the meat; and there was Brine, playing quietly with some sticks – he was three and the supreme darling of Bahia’s heart.

Three years ago she and Bobakin, having lived together in the woods for three months, had once ventured out to steal some corn from the fields. When they arrived, they saw a large crowd gathering in the square and being children used to following their own whims, snuck behind a shed and listened.

“Brothers and sisters!” proclaimed Leader Carl, “today we are visited upon by another demon! A demon of evil who heralds curses and famine, disease and death. Though they are clothed in the garments of angels they will not long stay hid – if we have the courage to seek them out. Today! A mother has approached me with the tidings that she has found a demon! Under her own roof. Watch and beware that this curse fall not upon your own family. A seemingly innocent babe, clothed in the disguise of his seeming Baptism, has revealed his true nature! And we will do our duty.”

Then the two Halfbreeds, crouching as they listened with morbid interest, heard a baby’s cry from the house beside them.

Bobakin moved to go. “Come on,” he said, “we can’t be found.”

“Oh but Bobakin!” cried Bahia, unexpectedly, “maybe it’s the babe. The one they’re going to burn. It’s going to die!”

Bobakin shrugged, “They all die.”

“We didn’t. Oh please Bobakin. I’ll take ever so good care of it. Please.”

Bobakin sighed in frustration. He did not relish the thought of a baby to slow them down and cry and fuss; but then, he was fond of Bahia like a treasured sister, and she so seldom asked for anything...., “Alright.” He said, fiercely, “But let’s make sure first that it *is* the baby.” So they crept into the house and pulled back the blanket from its face. There was no mistaking – this was a Halfbreed.

So they had raised the baby between them: Bahia mainly, while Bobakin hunted. It was hard but a ten-year-old can do more when she’s called upon than might be expected, and Brine blossomed under her care.

But Bebbin was a different matter, having only been with them three months, and Bahia did not know him so well. He would sometimes get strange humors that made him moody and would avoid talking to anyone for days together. Bahia had tried to draw him out but soon learned it was best to let him be until he came out of it on his own. Now he had fallen into one of his moods just when the moon was rising and disappeared.

Bahia shrugged, "I'll have the men hunt him up when they get home," she decided as she climbed down into the loft. She had taken to calling them that, since they were the hunters, and she and Fafolio had become the 'women'.

So when Bobakin, Nappy, and Denmin returned, Bahia sent them back out (each with a slice of cornbread) to search for the boy. They went in three different directions back towards the wood when Denmin presently called out, "It's alright – I've found him!"

They all heard, but instead of a worried mother who frets over her lost child when found, all concerned parties returned to the campfire. Denmin had said it was alright so it must be alright, and like true children they all, even Bahia, thought more of their stomachs at that moment.

"Hey little fellow," said Denmin to Bebbin, "whatcha doin' out here?"

Bebbin was curled up beneath a bush, as far under as he could manage, with his knees pulled up to his chest. "Just thinkin'" he said.

"Comin' back to camp?"

"No."

"Right then," Denmin plopped down under the bush beside the boy, "guess I'll think with you." He was reasoning to himself that since he was the Niceman, maybe he

should be nice right now, and not leave the small lad alone in the dark (which, of course, was his first instinct, thinking about the cozy fire and warm food waiting).

“Waddaya thinkin’ about?” he asked Bebbin.

The little boy’s voice was atremble, “My home.”

“What, the barn?”

Bebbin did not respond.

“Well, it’s a nice place,” said Denmin, taking his silence as assent, “better’n anywhere I’ve lived before.”

“Not me!” said Bebbin impulsively, “I’ve lived in a better. Where there’s warm beds, and a fire, and a grandma, and sister, and a little cat that purrs when you pet it.”

“What, a grandma like an old lady? You lived with one?” Denmin did not mean to be offensive, but he was rather surprised.

“A grandma’s the best thing in the whole world!”

“Hey, hey, sure! I just wouldn’t know.”

“She never wanted me to be burned. She said a Halfbreed wasn’t a demon, just a regular boy....Was she right?” His large brown eyes caught the moonlight in large orbs of wonder, and his little lips shook with despair and pain and loss. He was a little boy grappling with too big of questions.

Denmin met those brown eyes, that blond hair, that little straight-backed, straight-legged body: right there and then, there was nothing to tell Bebbin apart from any other human child. Yet he was a demon – well, half-demon. Half-Schump.

“Look here,” said Denmin, hoping that his title bequeathed him understanding he did not possess, “Humans are good, see? But sometimes they’re wrong and another

human's got to tell them so. Where I come from they don't kill or burn Halfbreeds – unless they act evil. Well, you've never acted evil, so likely your grandma was right 'bout you. What I'm tryin' ta say is – the humans in your village are wrong to burn you, because if we try hard enough, we can be the good that is human in us just as much as the evil that is Schump."

He waited. It was a long speech, and he was not so sure about it himself.

"Sooo..." said Bebbin slowly, "I can be human if I try hard?"

"Yeah. Not that I think you'll ever walk different – after all, you is what you is. But maybe you can act human."

Then, for the first time that Denmin had ever seen, Bebbin smiled, "Yeah. I can act human."

Then Denmin lifted Bebbin onto his back and piggybacked him to the fire. Bahia was pleased to see that Bebbin had come out of his moodiness, and that he proceeded to eat and play heartily.

She went to Denmin, "What was the matter?"

"He missed his Grandma," he said, wolfing down the food she offered him.

"Hmm, maybe we oughta have a Grandma," Said Bahia reflectively.

"No, I don't think so."

"Why not?" she demanded.

"It's just not....I mean, I don't think...." He did not know how to put into words what he was feeling, "I just don't think that's what you do. Besides, we've got a Nicegirl: that's sorta like a Grandma."

And Bahia grinned, "Yeah. Ok."

Chapter 4 – To Grow Up

Bahia was combing her hair by the stream that flowed from the lake. It was in this stream that she would sometimes order everyone off to bathe. Not regularly, for the only regularity that existed in their lives was day-to-day, sunrise to sunset. They had no notion for tracking weeks, and months, and years. But every once in awhile, Bahia would notice just how grimy and filthy everyone looked, and would order that that day was a bath day.

She would roll up her sleeves and order the 'men' down to the stream first, even Bobakin, and would keep guard to ensure that not one of them escaped without thorough inspection. Then she and Fafolio would herd the young ones down and would scrub for all they were worth, until the little faces shone like the midday sun. And when

all the boys had scuttled away as fast as they were able, the girls gladly stripped themselves of their filthy garments and plunged into the water.

Now Bahia was alone, for Fafolio had already returned to camp. But Bahia enjoyed her moment of peace and quiet. Here, with only the brook bubbling its tale and the leaves rustling in the breeze, she felt truly alive and invigorated. A thought came to her as she sat there – a memory. Of ladies dressed in their finest, and men fitted out in their best, and music playing in the square, and couples dancing like they walked on air. She sighed with the happiness of that memory. And then she laughed. She would like to dance herself! So she tossed her hair over her shoulder, picked up her skirts, and began to twirl. And she spinned, and she spinned, and she spinned!

Then suddenly, like a dream, another old memory came back to her – of a tune. And she began to sing.

Oh merry ladies come hither and dance

Come hither and dance

Come hither and dance

Oh merry ladies come hither and dance

But who shall you pick for a partner?

Oh sunny laddie, it's you that I choose

It's you that I choose

It's you that I choose

Oh sunny laddie, it's you that I choose

But what about my father?

He'll rant and he'll rave but he'll pick out a tune

He'll pick out a tune

He'll pick out a tune

He'll rant and he'll rave but he'll pick out a tune

For of music who is fonder?

The sky was glorious, and the wind was glorious, and the birds in the trees were glorious, and for a moment, Bahia imagined herself six years old again, and dancing in the village square.

Then a new note erupted into her dreaming – a cry of pain and panic. “Bahia! Bahia! We need you! Bahia!” She ran to the camp and saw Nappy white as a sheet, carried by Bobakin. Denmin was running ahead.

“He was attacked,” panted Denmin, “and he’s bleeding.”

They brought him to the fire, and Fafolio wrapped him in a blanket. Nappy had never before looked so small. Bahia met Bobakin’s gaze, “If the villagers attacked him-”

“It wasn’t the villagers,” broke in the older boy, “it was a wolf. But we killed it, so it won’t be back here.” Bobakin was out of his element in this situation. When Nappy fell beneath the wolf, Bobakin did not panic. He fought, with Denmin, to anger and distract it, looked it in the eye when it whirled on them, and, as if in a blur of unreality, slew it with his knife. When Nappy lay senseless on the ground, with his wound bleeding out, Bobakin did not panic. He carried the small boy as quickly, but as calmly, back as

possible. But all the while he knew nothing about how to actually treat the sick boy. And now, having relinquished him into Bahia's care, Bobakin felt helpless and a little bit of panic welled up inside.

But Bahia was calm and assessed the wound: there was a deep gash in Nappy's leg that not only bled but was full of dirt and leaves. "Alright," said the girl, "we have to clean it. Fafolio, bring me water from the spring." Fafolio ran away, her long legs carrying her quickly down the hill. Bahia knew precisely what to do for Nappy: girls often just seem have a sense for those things. "Bobakin..." she said, but hesitated, because she knew the danger she was proposing. But Bobakin could see that Bahia knew what to do and if she was going to give him a job....well, the brief moment of encroaching panic vanished, and he waited expectantly. So when she looked in the boy's sure brown eyes, she saw that he would listen and not balk. "There is medicine in the village," she said, "I need you to get it. But I don't know which is best. There is a doctor, and he would know. So I need you to go to him, in disguise, and ask for it."

"But won't he know I'm a Halfbreed? After all, I'll be a stranger..."

Bahia shook her still damp hair, "Not if you say you're from another village. Just say that you ran out of the medicine there and need some from him."

Bobakin nodded, "Right. Ok."

When he had rubbed dirt into his hair and covered it with a cap, Bobakin looked no different than any human child; so with a set face, he prepared to head to the village. But when he reached the extremity of their camp, Denmin intercepted him.

"Wait! You can't get the medicine without curre'cy."

"Curre'cy, what's that?"

Denmin held up some rabbit skins, "It's stuff you trade for other stuff. So's you don't steal. They won't let you have it elsewise. But this should get it for you."

When Bobakin entered the town, it was quiet and no one was to be seen in the street. It was in fact dinner time, though Bobakin did not remember that. He only thanked his lucky stars and headed for the doctor's office. The Doctor, fortunately, was working late, and looked up when Bobakin came in.

He was a small man with only a fuzz of hair in a semi-circle around his head and a nose that curled under at the tip. He tilted his head and inspected Bobakin from behind spectacles that made him look near-sighted.

"What do you want, young man?" he demanded, in a sharp tone. The doctor was not usually an irritable character, but today he had served a poor family. On leaving the office, they had promised to pay him another time, and he had let it pass; but he knew that these people, being the sort of people that they were, would never pay. He did not mind serving the poor for no charge, but it irritated him when people pretended to intend to pay, when in fact they never meant to at all. So now he snapped at the boy that burst in upon him, for he saw the rags that clothed his skinny body and pessimistically foresaw the same outcome.

"Please sir," said Bobakin, as respectfully as he could, "my brother and I are from another town, and while we were hunting, he was attacked and now his leg has a gash. I need some medicine."

"Flesh wound, eh? Can you see to the bone?"

"No, I don't think so," Bobakin hoped his hair still looked brown.

“Right then,” the doctor turned to his cabinet, and pulled down a paste, “slab this on generously, and it should prevent any infection, but I don’t have anything to speed up the healing. Don’t suppose you can pay for this?” he growled.

Bobakin pulled out the skins from inside his jacket, “You mean curre’cy?”

The doctor grunted as he inspected the furs, “Small, but they’ll do.”

Bobakin, in relief, turned to go when he was stopped by the doctor speaking again. He thought in panic that the man might have recognized him for the little village boy he had been so long ago, but the man was simply regretting his harsh attitude toward a polite, displaced young man, “You very far from home, boy?”

“Shouldn’t be too bad of a trip,” said Bobakin, inwardly trembling, “not once I’ve got his leg all bandaged up.”

The doctor didn’t look convinced so Bobakin insisted, “Really sir, we’ll be fine.”

The doctor shrugged, “All right then. Just watch for bleeding. If it’s too much, take a break and wrap it up again. And don’t use all that stuff at once, either. Make it last. And keep him plenty hydrated, or he might pass out.”

Bobakin nodded, now desperate to get away, “Yes, thank you, sir. Good-bye, sir.” And he managed to calmly walk out the door, through the town, and out of sight into the trees. It was there that he leaned shakily against a birch trunk to calm his racing heart.

But then he ran for the camp, elated with his successful venture.

Nappy’s wound never did get infected, but Bahia did not sleep for three nights.

By the end of it she was yelling at Brine (which was unprecedented), nagging Bobakin (which was rare), and picking on Denmin (which was a surprisingly frequent occurrence and probably not a total result of her physical state). On the third day, Fafolio came into the barn where Bahia sat anxiously beside the pale, frail little boy. Fafolio was only there to grab a bat for the ball game outside, but when she saw the drooped shoulders and tilting, sagging head, she hesitantly approached Bahia and touched her on the shoulder.

“Hey, Bahia? Should I watch Nappy now? I can do it and then you can sleep.”

But Bahia shook her head drunkenly, “No, no. This is my job.”

Fafolio nodded, “Ah, ok.” And confusedly, she left.

“Hey Fafolio! Where you been!” cried Denmin when the tall girl emerged from the barn.

Fafolio walked over to him and said quietly, “I think Bahia is having a hard time.”

“Are you telling me this because I’m the Niceman?” he asked grumpily. Why couldn’t anyone go to Bobakin with their problems?

“Yeah. I think she needs help.”

“What kind of help. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I think she’s just tired.” Then she told what was said in the barn.

Denmin nodded, thinking. He *really* wanted to play ball. “Ok! Fine. I’ll talk to her,” he said, giving in to Fafolio’s soft yellow eyes.

Bahia hardly looked up when Denmin came in. “Hey, Bahia!” he shouted. He was in no mood to soothe or be gentle. “What’s the matter?”

“Hm? Oh, ah, nothing’s the matter. He’s doing much better.”

“Ok. So you can rest now.”

“Oh no. Something might happen again: I have to stay and watch.”

“Look Bahia,” said Denmin, “You look terrible. I mean, you look like a diseased badger that should crawl in a hole and die. Why can’t Fafolio watch him? She offered.”

“Well,” Bahia snapped, “she might miss something, or not know what to do.”

Denmin took a deep breath: she was not making this easy, “Bahia, I’m the Niceman, and when the others tell me they need help, I just have to help them. I figure, that’s what you think about Nappy. That cause you’re the Nicegirl, you have to take care of him. But you don’t. And if he gets worse, Fafolio can call you.” Bahia still did not look convinced, although her heart was yearning for rest. So he finished by adding, “If you don’t go to sleep, I’ll get Bobakin to make you.”

“Fine!” cried Bahia irritably, “But *make sure* Fafolio knows to call me if he wakes up or anything else. Alright? And to give him water when he wakes up. He likes that.”

“Yeah, I’ll tell her. Now go on.” The others must have started the game by now.

So Bahia went to bed, and Fafolio sat beside Nappy. It was a good thing that Bahia actually slept through that time, since Fafolio, while a good girl, did not tend Nappy with the same devotion and care Bahia had watchfully given, and Bahia’s maternal heart would have bled for the little boy.

But she did sleep. And when she awoke, Nappy was wide awake and cheerful, anxious even to get up and move about. But Bobakin and Bahia convinced him otherwise, and he was soon content to lie still and describe his ailments in detail to a young, wondering audience.

Bahia left him there and made her way down to the stream. She sat beside the water and enjoyed the quiet and fresh air. She noticed that summer was beginning to pass away, and a cool air was on the breeze. That meant winter was not far off. Well, let it come. They were more sheltered than they had ever been, and they would weather it through.

The winter in that land was never overly difficult. Bahia had heard tales from long ago of frozen water falling like rain, but that had never happened here. Winter was simply dull and cold, and food was often scarcer.

Bahia remembered her dance: it now felt like years ago and not three days. She felt, somehow, older than she had that morning. As if childhood were something of the past. She realized with a start that that meant she was growing up! But she did not want to.

Because there was no one to show her how.

Chapter 5 – More Girls

The winter came and after several boring, uneventful, and often cranky months, it passed away again. The villagers still did not bother the children, and the children themselves were beginning to get used to their new living quarters on the outskirts of society. They were, in fact, beginning to take it for granted.

Removed from the village, they no longer heard of or encountered the Schumps, and they began to grow lax in their guard against everyone and everything that once, only a little while ago, had filled them with fear and trembling.

But one day in late March, as Fafolio was shelling wild peas for Bahia, who was making rabbit soup, Bobakin came up to them with a troubled expression.

“Bahia,” he said, “we’ve forgotten about the village.”

“And they’ve forgotten about us,” Bahia agreed, “it’s the best thing for everyone.”

Bobakin sat down and accepted the peapod that Fafolio gave him. He had more to say, "We've forgotten that they kill, and we are not the only ones as should be hiding from them."

"Who else besides Halfbreeds need fear humans?" asked Bahia.

"Other Halfbreeds."

"Oh," Bahia thought about that. Bobakin went on, "There are still more. They keep being born, and they haven't stopped killing them just because we're not there. They don't bother us, because of what happened to Bebbin, but they kill the others."

"You're right," said Bahia sadly, "I had forgotten."

"When I was hunting, I saw a great smoke appear in the center of the village, and remembering what that meant for me when I was small, I crept close to observe. Sure enough, there is the sound of a small child crying in a back shed, and Leader Carl is on his pilgrimage."

"Can we help it?" asked Fafolio.

Bobakin looked at Bahia, "We have before," he said.

So the children planned a rescue party to snatch the child away from its fiery death. Everyone wanted to be part of the mission, and everyone had a reason.

"I'm the leader," said Bobakin, "so of course I have to go!"

"But there should only be a few that goes, so's we don't attract attention," said Denmin, "and since I'm the Niceman, I should be one of them."

"Excuse me?" said Bahia, "I'm the Nicegirl, and I've had *experience* rescuing Halfbreeds from the village."

“I’m the one who comes up with good ideas, so if something goes wrong, you’ll need me to come up with a good plan,” said Nappy.

Little Brine cried out, “I’ve *been* rescued from burning, so I know what it’s like! I should go.”

“You wouldn’t *remember*,” said Fafolio.

“Yeah,” added Kaka, “we remember running away.”

Bebbin cried indignantly, “I’ve *never* gone on a rescue mission before – it’s *my* turn!”

In the midst of their uproar, which was quickly escalating into a showdown between Denmin and Bobakin, with Brine and Bebbin already pulling Kaka’s hair, and Bahia and Nappy betting on the brawlers, a quiet, hesitating voice broke in underneath the swelling current, “Excuse me, please. Please.”

There, in the light of the barn doorway, tall and beautiful and erect, was a young human woman. She was holding a baby.

The children all stood stock still in surprise which quickly changed to alarm. No humans had approached their sanctuary before, and they feared that perhaps a whole army stood behind this lone woman. Bobakin leapt up and vaulted over to her, “Who are you!?” he shouted, in a voice none of the children had ever heard before. He was almost as tall as the woman.

The human stumbled backwards, exclaiming, “Please, please, I only want some help. I’m not here to hurt you.”

“So tell us who you are,” said Bobakin, quieter but no less threatening. Nappy, Denmin, and Kaka had come up behind him now, holding sticks the size of cudgels.

Bahia and Fafolio had also fortified themselves with the same weapons, and stood back near the little ones.

“My name is Cynthia,” she said; she was crying. “And this is my baby. She is six months old. Her name is Liael. She’s a Halfbreed.”

Nappy went up to her, and she held out the infant. He inspected it. “Not likely,” he said, looking back at Bobakin, “this baby’s as human as any other.”

“I know it looks that way,” said Cynthia beseechingly, “but don’t you see...I *know*. I know who’s baby this is. Everyone in the village thinks it was my husband’s – he died last autumn – but he and I didn’t...It isn’t his.”

“How can you be so sure?” asked Bobakin, still suspicious. He had only been a child after all, when he left his village and did not know the ways of the world.

Cynthia seemed to understand this and looked at him firmly, “There are ways of telling,” she said.

Bahia now came forward, any previously entertained concerns about this woman driven away by her apparent desperation. “Why have you come to us?” she asked.

Cynthia’s eyes quickened when she saw Bahia’s strong, maternal face. With a rushed, almost frantic movement, she bent forward and pushed the child into Bahia’s arms. Then she pulled back and hugged herself, “I’m here to leave her with you. I’m here because I won’t burn her. I won’t!”

“But you’re a human,” said Bobakin wonderingly, “why do you think we’ll help you? Why do you ask it of us?”

“We’ll take her!” cried Bahia, impulsively. “We’ll take her.”

Cynthia smiled. She was looking at the ground and hugging herself still, but she smiled. "Thank you," she whispered. Then she turned around and left for the village.

Bobakin turned to Bahia with a demanding question in his eyes. But she only smiled and shrugged, and carried the baby back to Fafolio.

"Here," she said to the younger girl, "I had my chance with Brine. Now this can be your baby." Tenderly, Fafolio clasped the infant to her chest and whispering soft words to it, carried it off to get some water. Bobakin shrugged; after all, what was one more child amidst all the others?

"Right then!" said the leader of the Halfbreeds loudly, just so everyone would know he still was the leader, "I'll choose who goes on this rescue! Me, Denmin, Bahia, and Kaka. The rest of you are to stay here, and Fafolio is to take care of her baby. Let's go!"

And just like that, without any other preparation, the small band headed off to the village.

The rescue turned out to be a simple affair, for there was only one guard outside the shed wherein the Halfbreed was held. It was an effortless matter for Kaka to sneak up from behind and smother him with a leaf of the Kortigan Plant. With the guard unconscious, there was not another soul within hearing distance, so they broke the window without attracting any attention. The Halfbreed inside was a little girl about six years old, with red hair and normal legs. But her eyes, which were mostly blue, had orange streaks in them. "Come with us?" asked Kaka companionably, when Bobakin lifted him up to the window sill.

And so the female population of the Little Halfbreed Colony doubled in the span of one single, eventful day.

Chapter 6 – The Tournament

In keeping with human prejudice, the villagers were none too happy that another Halfbreed roamed free within shooting distance of their homes. After Bobakin and the others rescued Dalimi from the barn (that was her name), Carl Drax was newly inflamed with anger against their band so that he tasted blood. The Halfbreeds were a curse on society and ought, as Carl Drax daily reminded the villagers, to be offered as incense to the sky, a prayer sent heavenwards that clearly declared the people's repugnance of all things sinful and wicked. To allow such evil to dwell on the very borders of the village was an atrocity that must be cured as soon as possible.

But there was the Bullbeast. Time had not weakened the hold its strange behavior had upon the imaginations of the villagers. On the contrary, the tale weathered into a sort of legend, growing greater and more terrible the more time passed. The

Bullbeast's hide was supposedly impenetrable, and no man had yet succeeded in killing it. But Carl Drax was desperate.

Carl Drax was a man of rare and unbounded conviction, standing apart from the other villagers in the intensity of his passions and beliefs. He believed in God, and that God had a perfect plan for the human race: a plan that abhorred any contamination as ungodly, wicked, and demonic. As preacher in the village, he inflamed, through his learning and convictions, the imaginations and prejudices of the people, but he came up as against a brick wall when faced with the awesome manifestations of the natural world, for that is superstition's ultimate playing field. He resolved, after the Halfbreeds rescued the little girl, to make war upon the source of these superstitions and thus banish them once and for all, so that the little demons that lived in the Rosenchans Barn may finally meet their predestined doom.

It was with a fiery appeal, therefore, that Carl Drax addressed the villagers and inflamed them with the resolve to gather together the best archers in the land, and bring the Bullbeast to a decided and irrefutable end. Denmin was hunting at the time, and had crept in close to the village when he saw all the stir. He listened with boyish excitement and then hastened to bring the news to the rest of the Halfbreeds.

Bobakin received the news with unmixed anticipation. He thought what fun it would be to see a real tournament and gave no thought to the safety of the Bullbeast. He knew it had saved Bebbin once but having grown up in fear of the beast that one act was not enough to make him love it. Also, he knew not that its existence was their current salvation and did not suspect that the human's slaughter betokened a future

butchery. He did not stand in awe of it, as the humans did, for being children, the Halfbreeds were not so strongly affected by negative superstition.

Therefore, with unilateral expectation, the little male Halfbreeds planned a joyous outing to watch the Bullbeast's death.

Fafolio watched them from where she sat on the grass. The boys were wild with excitement, and even Bahia was listening attentively, but Fafolio only watched, quietly twisting the reeds in her lap into long, thin ropes. She was making a basket in which to carry Liael. Fafolio had always kept to herself amongst the Halfbreeds, quiet by nature and still very lonely for her own village. Fafolio had lived there until she was eight and remembered it clearly. She had not been so different among the other children since there were, in fact, many Halfbreeds. They were teased, certainly, as any child even slightly different is singled from among the majority and ridiculed, but the Halfbreeds banded together and the human children soon learned to accept them. Unlike Bobakin or Bahia, who chose not to think about the horrors of their past, the eventful, horrifying day that collapsed her life would stay clear in Fafolio's mind like the midday sun until the day she died. Eight-year-old Fafolio had left her house early to pick some berries in the forest (even though she was not allowed out on her own) because it was her mother's birthday, and her mother loved gooseberries. She was leaning into a gooseberry bush, her little legs that were already losing their baby fat stretching on tiptoe to reach the plump berries, when there sounded screams. Many screams; that came from the village. She stood frozen in horror, listening. Then she covered her ears – the basket with the berries rolled to the ground – and tried not to hear. Then, through the muffled barrier of her little hands, there came the crash of a door burst open, and her father's

loud voice yelling. She started running back. The closer she got, the more she could make out words that the people yelled. Her father's voice had stopped – why had it stopped? Her mother was screaming: no, she was crying. Another man's voice was yelling at her. He was asking where the little monster was. Where was she? he asked, but her mother only wept and then screamed inarticulately at him. Fafolio had almost reached the town, almost reached her house, when, closer inside the wood, she heard feet running. They were coming to her, but she did not think to be scared. All she wanted to know was why her father and mother were so upset. Bursting from the trees came her older brother, Corein, and he was carrying another little boy from the village, Kaka. In his other hand was a long knife, red with blood.

“Corein!” cried Fafolio and darted to him.

He dropped the knife and held her close. “Lolo,” he said, “Lolo, you're all right. Oh god, you're all right.”

“Mother's crying,” said Fafolio, and she started back towards the house. But Corein held her firmly back.

“Yes,” he said and blinked hard, “You need to take Kaka. You're not safe here. You need to run: run far. I will meet you at the firdell, but they will be here soon, and I have to fight them off.”

“Who? Why?”

Corein looked at his little sister and there was so much love in his eyes. Fafolio never forgot that look. “Because you're a Halfbreed,” he told her, “and some other villages don't like Halfbreeds. They want to kill them all....Now go! I'll be there soon.”

Fafolio took the little five-year-old's hand, and she and Kaka went away into the forest. She looked back once and saw Corein standing in the same place, knife in his hand, his back to her, waiting.

She never saw him again.

Fafolio never talked to any of the other Halfbreeds about that day. She and Kaka had met Bobakin in the forest only a few days after running away, and he had welcomed them immediately into the already expanding group, but neither he nor Bahia thought it necessary to ask why they ran. To them it was self-explanatory. Now Fafolio sat in the grass, watching everyone else planning to enjoy a game – a game that would decide their fate.

The big day arrived, and all the Halfbreeds set out. Even Fafolio went, with little Liael snuggled in her basket. Bebbin awoke that morning feeling ill, but he said nothing. His cheeks were flushed and a rash covered his entire abdomen, but the little boy would let nothing prevent him from experiencing the promised fun of that day.

For they were children. And children, while innocent, are naive and do not think, nor understand, nor desire to know the ways of the world, or the laws that govern reality. They seek only to gratify momentary pleasures without any thought for consequence, and thus unwittingly become their own downfall. It is only luck and blind chance, or perhaps overworked guardian angels, that allow any child to reach adulthood.

They travelled circuitously through the woods that bordered the pens and skirted the wheatfield. It was a dangerous path that they seldom ventured upon since it was

closer to notorious sightings of Schumps. But today was a special day, so while they were cautious...they were daring.

When they arrived, inconspicuous and eager, the proceedings had already begun. They could hear very little except when the Tournament Caller spoke, who was well chosen for the position.

The Tournament Caller announced that all contestants should stand forth. Four villagers advanced. They were men, big and built, with leather and furs wrapped around their sleek, naked bodies. They were hunters by profession, some of them having killed Halfbreeds, one or two having even faced and killed a Schump. The tournament was technically open to anyone, but the Bullbeast was a formidable creature, and most of the villagers did nothing more graphic in their daily lives than butcher a tame cow or pig. Only those accustomed to the sport of death were willing to compete.

The Tournament was beginning. One of the hunters drew his bow, planted his feet, and stared at the Bullbeast. It was asleep, lying against the far end of its pen. The arrow flew!

And it pinged off the beast's hide like a raindrop off a metal roof. The beast did not even stir. But the crowd did. This was truly a creature from hell.

The Tournament Caller called for the next contestant, and the next contestant stood forth. He raised his bow, measured the distance, and let it fly. The weapon was lighter than the first Hunter's, and the arrow flew with surprising speed. It sung through the air, arced perfectly, and for a brief, quick moment, the hunter's heart swelled with pride. But his, too, glanced off the hide of the beast.

Now the crowd was growing anxious. These were weapons and shots that would have felled a lion, and the Bullbeast did not even deign to acknowledge them. One of the Villagers cried out that they should respect the demon! The demon and the Halfbreeds could not be contended with! But Carl Drax calmed them with his reassurances, and the next contestant stood forth. Most of the Halfbreeds were jumping up and down with the ecstasy of it, and none so much as Bobakin: for the wild, untamed jungles of his heart soared gleefully, and sympathetically responded to the wild lawlessness of death.

The next archer took his stance, sized the beast, and lifted his mighty weapon. It was a fearsome device, and Nappy stared in wide-eyed fascination at the muscles that ripped as he mounted it upon his brawny shoulder. Then another hunter approached, and pulled with his burly arms the mighty arrow that was the size of a fullgrown man. When released - that awful moment between action and reaction – it parted the air like a diver through water, so that the actual currents were visible around it. All gasped and held their breath and Nappy clenched his fists and Bobakin leaned forward and Denmin hung from a branch overhead and the arrow was true and hit the neck and fell to the ground. The Bullbeast lifted its head, looked at the humans, and went back to sleep.

Before the humans had a chance to think, indeed, before anyone had a moment to quite grasp reality, an unearthly howl erupted from the trees and Bobakin ran. His chest was bare, his hair uncombed, his face muddied and his eyes on fire. He was shouting and catcalling and whooping and hurraing like a lunatic. All the Halfbreeds took off after him. They let out yodels and whoops, and waved their hands above their heads. In their ragged clothing, with green tangled hair, and brown-tanned legs kicking

every which way, they looked more like little beasts than ever, and their wild yelling conferred an air of freakishness on their strange contortions. If ever the villagers had a reason to fear the Halfbreeds, that fear was now manifest in the forms of the little creatures cavorting over the fields toward them.

Were they mad? These little uncivilized beasts? What possessed them to behave thus before their mortal enemies? Something primal in Bobakin's heart had reacted to the plight of the Bullbeast: he knew no words to describe it, had no thoughts on the matter. He was acting from pure instinct, and it was driving him like a wild thing into the midst of the villagers. And they were retreating before him. There was something inside him that wanted to protect the beast, to unite with him in crying out in union with the earth against death. Did the earth like death? He did not want to kill: he had no thoughts at all.

The humans were screaming, turning, fleeing. A handful stood stock still in terror, staring at their approaching doom. But Bobakin had no thoughts of death: for himself or the humans. Just joy; and it was joy that was ripping through his untamed heart. He let out a wild call, and Denmin, Nappy, and Bahia yodelled out in sympathy. He contorted his body every which way, and they followed suit. They were almost to the pens now, when suddenly, to their revulsion, there came a different sort of noise.

A horrible sick sound and Bobakin turned to see Bebbin throw up and then fall over. They all stood stock still a moment, and then Bahia knelt beside him. He was sweating, flushed, and shivering. His little teeth rattled and his eyes were shut tight in misery. The village doctor still stood amongst the few remaining villagers, and now he stepped forward a bit. He looked hard at Bebbin from a distance, less afraid now that all

the Halfbreed's attentions were on one of their own, and observed as well as his shortsighted eyes would allow him. He pushed his spectacles up his curved nose, and then in horror, leapt back, and whirled on the villagers.

"It's the plague," he cried. "They've brought the plague upon us!" The villagers who had remained in mindless terror now screamed and panicked. The women wept and went into hysterics. The force that had held them all to the ground was no more, and they fled for their lives. They knew this was fate's retaliation for their actions against the Bullbeast.

Bobakin's head was spinning. He looked at Bebbin lying on the ground and at the empty place where, a moment ago, a hundred people had stood. He was no longer exultant. That wild something that had awakened in his heart and filled him with such power and joy was gone, replaced with a helpless fear of the unknown. He looked at the Bullbeast, and it was looking back at him. He startled back: his soul filled with terror, looking into the great depths of tamed madness in the beast.

Then Bahia's voice broke through his thoughts, "Bobakin! You have to carry him; he can't walk."

Bobakin lifted the little boy's shaking body, "Why did they run, Bahia?" he asked.

"They don't want to get sick," she told him.

"Well, that seems silly. Everyone gets sick sometimes. I got sick when I was little, and my mother took care of me until I got better. They ran from him: from what he did to us."

Bahia glanced at the bullbeast briefly and then herded the children back toward the barn. She called out to Fafolio and Brine, who were fallen behind. "I don't know," she said to Bobakin, and he was surprised by the look on her face. It too had lost its untamed glory: it looked older. "All I know is Bebbin is sick, and we have to make him better."

Chapter 7 – The Valley of the Shadow

In the next few days, Bebbin was not the only one to get sick. Kaka was next, then Fafolio. Denmin got it two days after that, and Bahia was kept in the barn day after day, soothing fevers and cleaning up retches. The children were eating rather badly, since Bobakin was cooking, and every semblance of order that had once existed was now completely undone. The Niceman and Nicegirl were no longer available, the calm presence of Fafolio no longer regulated tempers, and the healthy children were left to their own devices.

Brine felt particularly neglected, since he missed his Baa, as he called Bahia. She was no longer around to pet him, and so he often wandered into the barn and stood watching her bend over the patients and kneel wearily beside them. One evening, he came up to where she sat, leaning with her head on her knee.

“Baa, you kay?” he asked with his childish lilt, laying his chubby hand on her shoulder.

She smiled at him and gave him a big hug, “I am now that you’re here,” she said.

He smiled, “will you come out soon? Are they getting better?”

She looked at the children lying before her. “Bebbin is. And he’s had it the longest, so I guess that makes sense. But Kaka seems to be getting worse. Denmin isn’t so bad: he never seemed as sick as the others. But I just don’t know what I’m doing!”

Brine, in his little baby mind, knew that somehow everything right now was wrong, although he did not understand why. So he just hugged her again, and gave her a kiss. “Ish’ll be ok,” he said.

Bahia smiled at him, “Yeah. Now go on and play, little man.”

The next day Bobakin carried Brine into the barn, “He’s shaking. He’s sick too.”

Bahia looked up at Bobakin, “Kaka shook all night. He didn’t sleep, and he screamed sometimes. His eyes were open, but he couldn’t see me. Bobakin, I’m scared. I don’t know what to do.”

Bobakin looked at Kaka: his cheeks were flushed, and even though his eyelids were closed, they were restless and agitated. He touched his forehead, and gasped, “I didn’t know a person could be so hot!”

“He’s felt that way for two days now. It can’t be good. I’ve tried to make him cooler, but he says he’s so cold.”

“When I was sick, my mom put a cold, wet rag to my forehead. Maybe that would help Kaka.”

Bahia nodded, “I’ll try anything.”

“I’ll get you one.”

Bobakin returned shortly and for two anxious hours, the children stooped over Kaka, keeping his forehead cool and his body warm. Eventually, the shaking stopped, and he grew quieter but his temperature did not change. Bobakin, after all the fuss, found that he wanted to cry, but he manfully resisted it. Then Kaka opened his eyes and looked at Bahia. To her surprise, he weakly smiled.

“Lots of beavers,” he said. “Going back and forth. In and out. Like ants. Bahia, I saw them. But now I’m going away with them. Somewhere better, I think...” his voice trailed off, and after a moment, Bahia realized that though his eyes still looked at her, they were unseeing. Bobakin, who had witnessed the life drain from many animals, closed the little boy’s eyelids, “He’s dead.”

Bahia looked at him, and her face was gray, “You’re sure?”

Once again, Bobakin felt the urge to cry. “Yes,” he managed to say, before he ran out of the barn. Bobakin ran into the woods with his slingshot and found a squirrel. He killed it.

Bahia still sat beside the body. She could not find the will-power to move. Then there was a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m feeling much better now,” Bahia looked up to see Bebbin standing before her. His fever was gone. “But I’m hungry,” he said. Then he noticed Kaka. “Is Kaka alright?”

“You are,” said Bahia, standing up. “And that counts for something. I’ll get you some food.”

Bebbin fully recovered, as did Denmin. They emerged from the barn thinner and tired but with the light of health in their eyes.

Fafolio worsened slowly but surely. There was no terrible shivering and hallucinating, like Kaka; she was lucid the entire time but her life was slowly slipping away from her. Her one concern, now that Kaka was gone, was for Liael. One day, as Nappy was sitting beside her, letting Bahia rest, she said to him, “Liael is too young to be alone. If I die, she will be.”

Amongst children there are no pretenses. They do not think to lie about important things. So Nappy, instead of assuring her that she would not die, or that Liael would never be alone, said, “There are still a lot of us. If any of us make it through this, I guess we’ll want to stick together. We’re all we have.” And somehow, it gave her more comfort than any false assurances.

The next night, Fafolio died.

They had buried Kaka in the woods. It was a shallow, heaped grave, with clumsy attempts at rock mounds clumped on top. Dalimi had gathered some sticks together and constructed a design of them on the foot of the grave, and though it was rough and

uncouth, it was the prettiest thing any of the children had ever seen. So now, when they buried Fafolio, Denmin asked Dalimi if she would do something special for her grave too. "Kaka was my first friend," she told Denmin, "But I think I can do something for Fafolio."

Bobakin was not at Fafolio's burial because he was shut up in the barn with Brine. He sent Bahia outside. "He'll be all right for a little while," he told her, trying hard not to show the fear in his heart, "Fafolio was your friend, and you should go." Bobakin knew it was right that he stay and Bahia go, but when he was alone in the barn with the quiet, sleeping Brine, fear swept over him. Not the fear of losing a friend, but the dreaded approach of death, that seemed lurking around every corner: a new and unfightable giant, bent on destroying happiness and peace and maliciously intent on carrying off every frail soul it found. Bobakin was afraid to meet this giant alone.

Fafolio's burial was an interesting occasion. Since this was the second funeral for the little community, Nappy knew better what to expect and so had made more preparation. But the others felt as if the novelty had worn off with the first one and found standing around for Nappy's ceremonies rather dull.

Nappy began by gathering the sticks that Dalimi was going to arrange, and carrying them solemnly to the hole. Then they lifted Fafolio and laid her gently down; Nappy gestured for Bebbin and Dalimi to throw some leaves upon her, and then he and Denmin pushed the dirt down into the hole. Dalimi arranged her sticks, and Nappy had everyone bring a stone to lay gravely somewhere around the dirt mound.

"Here," he said solemnly, "we bury a dear friend. A good girl, who was kind to everyone. Amen." He had heard the Amen somewhere before, but did not know what it

meant. But it seemed a fitting end to his little speech. "Everyone can go now," he declared when he finished.

Bahia walked slowly back to the barn. It was an absolutely beautiful day with the weather as clement as possible, the sky a deep, deep blue, and the sun practically kissing the earth. She thought maybe if she stayed outside and drank in the beauty of the light then all the illness would vanish, the dead would never have died, and she need not face that baby boy lying shivering in the barn. Her own little boy.

But wish as she might nothing could have turned her weary steps from their determined course; for enter the barn she must and face his miseries she would. There was nowhere but by his side in all the world.

Bobakin's face lit up when he saw her. He ran over and nearly took her hand like a little child then stopped himself. He stood awkwardly a moment; then said, "I'm glad you're back. I missed you."

She gave him a smile, but it was different from the one she had given Brine a few days ago. It was much sadder and older. It was motherly, for sure, but bitterly so. It was the smile of a mother who knew too much suffering. "Is he any better?"

"I don't know. I don't see any change."

But when Bahia looked, she saw a difference. Maybe it was absence that made his illness appear so much starker now, but his round, stub-nosed face was grayer than a grimy day, and his breathing was slow and shallow.

"At least he doesn't have a fever," said Bobakin.

But Bahia did not answer. She simply knelt down and started to sing to her baby. She caressed his forehead, crooned lovingly, and smiled sweetly when he opened his

eyes. "Hello, my darling," she whispered, and her plain face shone with an unearthly beauty. He smiled back. "Were you dreaming?" she asked.

He nodded, "About de Bullbeast. I dreamed we had it as a pet. In the clearing. And Kaka was giving it grass ta eat." His voice sounded surprisingly healthy in contrast to the color of his skin.

"That's a lovely dream."

She went to get some food, and Bobakin came up beside her. "What do you think?"

She held her chin high, "He's not going to die. Denmin and Bebbin didn't, so neither will he. You'll see."

For two days Bahia nursed Brine with a renewed vigor and a desperate determination. Two was too much so death would not cross their threshold again. He just wouldn't.

So it was devastating when he did. The fever returned, and Brine shivered and shook like it was the middle of February. He cried out and did not recognize her. She called desperately to him, but he did not hear and would not come back to her. Death was coming, and he stared at it in wide-eyed fear as Bahia stared at him with eyes of terror. He yelled out in anguish, and she shivered like a knife pierced her heart. Bobakin stood by, but there was nothing he could do. "Don't go," begged Bahia, "Don't go. I need you here. I love you. Don't go." But her hot tears fell upon an empty, still face.

No one else died, although several more fell ill, including Bahia. As she lay tossing and turning in her bed, as Bobakin soothed her burning forehead, Bahia wished hard to die. A fragmented memory from her childhood was nagging the back of her mind, and she clung hard to it: there was someone...someone...(oh! It was so fragmented, so hard to remember) someone said there was...there was what? It was about death. And death being life. And seeing someone we love when we die. Yes! She clenched her fists and Bobakin thought it was from pain, but she was grabbing hold of that memory and wishing that she could die, so she could see if it were true.

But Bahia was strong and hardy, and her body kept going even when her mind relinquished its strength.

While Bahia was ill, Bobakin fully assumed the full maturity of his role as leader. Bahia had been a stability for all the children, and Bobakin had always relied on her to be mature and know the proper things to do. But at fifteen he learned to be his own man: to assume full responsibility for the group, and especially the youngest children, the ones that were left: Bebbin and Liael.

So it was that when Bahia recovered and emerged from the barn, the small group that welcomed her was fully functioning and organized. Nappy was pale, himself only just recovering, and Denmin had a slight limp that would come and go for the rest of his life, but they were well-fed and even clean, for Denmin had organized a bath that they might be grime-free to welcome Bahia.

Bobakin led her to a log beside the fire, where she sat wrapped in a ratty blanket. He fed her venison broth by hand, and when dinner was over, directed Dalimi to fetch water, and Denmin to scrub the pot. Bahia, even in her weakened state, noticed these

changes and approved, for they allowed her to make the decision she knew was inevitable.

Chapter 8 – Farewell and Keep on

Bahia found Bobakin returning from a hunt. He was alone, but she took him an even further distance from camp, just to ensure complete privacy. He had a brace of rabbits over his shoulder and was looking forward to a cool drink of water, but Bahia wanting to speak to him was more important than that. She had been in a deep melancholy for a week, and he worried lest she slip back into a fever.

“You’re looking better,” he said; she was pale and thin, with eyes bereft of life and hands limp with disuse.

She looked up to tell him what she’d come to say but was arrested by his expression. It was so hopeful, so trusting. So unconscious. All he wanted was that she feel better, but he did not understand. Though she may walk and mechanically perform duties, she would never be better again. But he would be, and she couldn’t stand it.

“I’m leaving.”

“Okay,” he nodded, “Rabbits’ll be done by dark.”

He did not understand. “No.” she said quietly but firmly, “I have to go. For good. And never come back.”

He blinked, shifted his weight, tilted his head, and said nothing. Then he blinked again and shook his head a little. “Never?”

She swallowed hard, “Never.”

He worked his jaw back and forth, clenched his fists hard, took the rabbits off his shoulder, then put them back. His face was getting very worked up in an attempt to take it in, and she could tell that he would momentarily break out into a fit of loud temper. He would shoot off his crossbow, yell, kick a tree, something...and because she did not want a scene, she did something she had never done before. She stepped forward and hugged him.

He stood stiff a moment but then relaxed, dropped his bow and rabbits, and awkwardly hugged her back. “You all will be alright, you know. I can tell,” she said.

When they let go, he stood looking at the ground, “Don’t you love us anymore?”

“No, I don’t think so. I don’t know. – Probably. But I can’t think about it. I can’t think about anything anymore and when I’m here, I keep being reminded. I have to go.”

“I don’t understand,” his voice was so sad. She did not think a voice could be that sad. She did not realize that, for him, this abandonment was worse than the deaths.

“I know you don’t. I didn’t think you would. But I wanted to tell you so you’d know why I disappeared. This is goodbye.”

His lips were pressed firmly together, and he was shaking his head.

“Bobakin,” she said firmly so that he looked up at her, “This is goodbye.” She held out her arms again, and this time their embrace was not awkward but firm. Then she turned toward the wood and started walking. She had her crossbow and her ratty blanket hid under a bush on her way. Bobakin called after her, “Here!” he threw her one of the rabbits, “It’ll get you on your way!”

She did not smile, because she couldn’t; but she was grateful, and he knew it.

PART II

COMING OF AGE

Chapter 1 – The Schumps

Nappy crouched low in the underbrush, eyeing the bear that lumbered lazily beneath the lilac bushes. The boy had filled out in a surprising way in the five years since Bahia left. His shoulders were broad, his chest had grown into his arms, and his face was just beginning to show the faintest symptoms of scruff. But his orange eyes were as owly as ever, and his legs were still bowed. He pulled back on the bow that was much improved since those first early models and shot. The arrow was true: they would have bear that night.

The camp was chaotic when he returned, but it was always that way nowadays. There were so many more children, and so much more that went on in unhindered freedom.

After the second Bullbeast incident, Carl Drax realized that his preachings were falling fruitlessly upon deafly superstitious ears, so in a fit of anger, he packed up his things and moved to a different village. The children had remained unmolested since.

Nappy found Denmim and told him about the bear. "I'm going to need help hauling it back," he said.

Denmin and Nappy rounded up a few other boys, and they set out to skin and haul the bear. Dalimi watched them go.

She was beautiful. At eleven she promised to one day be the most gorgeous girl in camp, with her fiery red hair and prettily rounded figure. There was nothing of a Schump in the way she carried herself. Though not the oldest girl in camp, she had been there the longest and knew Bobakin better than anyone else. She often said it was because she could make carrot jam better than anyone – and Bobakin had an undeniable weakness for carrot jam – but she knew it was more than that. Somehow, she just understood him. His moodiness, occasional fits of temper, his weighty responsibilities, and above all, his clumsy, masculine attempts at affection, for he had a deeply caring heart.

She knew that once it had been broken, but he never told her about that.

Now seeing the boys leave to bring back supper, she rounded up the other cooks. They would have a chore preserving the meat, cooking it, and packing the rest away, so she wanted to start the prep immediately. She found Jenjen and had her begin boiling water, and sent little five-year-old Liael to find palm branch leaves. She herself began sifting the salt, which was the most tedious job, since all manner of things always

mixed into it. She made a mental note to do something about that...maybe construct some sort of screen...

Suddenly, a strange voice cut into her reverie, "Hey! You a halfblood?"

She turned around to face a strange young man with green hair and an imposing, but handsome, figure. His green eyes, the same color as his hair, flashed at her. She knew him immediately to be a man of position amongst his peers, "I'm not a Schump, and I'm not a human. What are you?"

He smiled a sneer, "Who's in charge here?"

"I am. At the moment. What's your business?"

"Look girlie, I got matters to discuss, and I ain't gonna do it with some sissy red head who tends the fire. I'm looking for a Bobakin and I ain't gonna leave until I find him."

Dalimi's eyes grew round despite herself, "You know Bobakin?"

"Of him."

"Well, he's not here. He's out hunting. I don't know when he'll be back."

The strange boy stepped in closer: uncomfortably close and looming over her. His body odor was far from pleasant, and Dalimi was more than a little uncomfortable. "You tell me where he is or I will – "

Bobakin's voice cut through his threats, "You'll what? Hurt her? Kidnap her? Tie her to a tree? I'd like to see you try." Bobakin was standing there with one hand on his hip and a knife in the other.

"You Bobakin?"

“Regardless of the answer this saber’s going straight through your gullet if you don’t step away from her this instant.”

With a look of satisfied scorn the stranger stepped back, and Dalimi moved closer to Bobakin.

“What’s your business?” asked Bobakin, “and you’d better speak fast before I run you out of this camp. How do you know my name?”

The boy raised an eyebrow at him, “Bahia.”

Dalimi’s eyes grew large, and she heard Bobakin suck in a sharp intake of breath, “Go on,” said Bobakin with surprising outer calm, “I’m listening.”

“No point filling you in on the few years since she dumped you. I’m here because she was taken by Schumps.” A bit of the boy’s bravado fell away for an instant, and then it quickly reasserted itself, “She used to mention you.”

Bobakin shrugged, “Ok, that’s not good, but she’ll return in two days.”

“It happens to humans, not us!” he exclaimed in anger. Then his proud shoulders slumped, “She’s been gone five days.”

“That is bad,” Said Bobakin grudgingly, “but what do you want from me?”

“We gotta get her back!”

“What? Go up against the Schumps!? No one does that, not even the humans. You’re crazy.”

The boy’s face grew bright red, and his green eyes glared through slits, “You know, the way she talked about you, I’d have thought you’d want to help her! But no! You don’t love her. Well I do! And if it’s crazy, then it’s crazy, but I ain’t gonna leave her there!”

Bobakin was silent, gravely studying the boy before him. Finally he answered him, "How many of you are there?"

"Three."

"And Bahia was the only one taken?"

"There are three girls in our group; all three were taken."

There was a commotion in the camp as Nappy and the others returned with the bear meat. "Dalimi!" Nappy called, "The meat's here!"

Dalimi looked in that direction, but did not move. "Dalimi!" called Nappy insistently.

"Make it yourself!" she yelled. Nappy was taken aback and looked at her in surprise. Then he shook his head and threw his hands in the air. Dalimi was a mild child, but when she acted out, it was best not to confront her. Denmin, however, came over. He stood near and eyed the strange boy with suspicion: anyone who made Dalimi upset was high in his mistrust.

Bobakin spoke, "Seems we have plenty of food. Get your other Halfbreeds and come to dinner. We'll plan after that."

The stranger sized up Denmin. He was tall and powerfully sturdy, with a ruddy complexion: everything about him promised strength and durability. Denmin was glaring at him but that did not quell the stranger: in fact, it raised the tall boy in his estimation. Accepting the capable appearances of Bobakin and Denmin, the stranger nodded, "All right. I'm Cornanam."

Cornanam and his two other Halfbreed compatriots wolfed down their food like mad gorillas. Dalimi had to smile – all boys were just alike. Then they told their tale: the little, that is, that there was to tell.

Bahia had found two boys in the wood, living together. Their names were Cornanam and Feirk. She joined them and presently the group grew to include a boy named Dishan and two girls – sisters, Bousia and Fichia – who were just a little younger than Bahia. Their life was no more eventful than could be expected of six children living in the woods until five days ago when Schumps – which most of them had only ever seen from a distance – crashed into their camp and, grabbing the young girls in their meaty long arms, ran away with them. The boys were upset but assumed that the girls would return the next day. Nothing happened. After three days they went to investigate the Schump camp.

“What was it like?” breathed Nappy, when Cornanam related that part.

“Like everything you ever imagined, but worse,” said Feirk. “They truly are beasts – but civilized in a way. We watched from a distance, so they never knew we were there, and there were so many of them. It’s like a city of beasts, but with mud structures that pass as houses, and they can obviously speak to each other. I saw what I think was writing on the outside of one of the structures.”

“Did you see your girls?” asked Bobakin.

“Yes, Bahia and Fichia,” said Cornanam, “I’m assuming Bousia was there somewhere.”

“What were they doing?”

“Cooking. Washing clothes. I think they were forced to work for the Schumps.”

They discussed it a long while. It was far into the night when they finally decided on a plan; the littlest children were curled up and asleep already. The three new boys coiled up beside the fire and dreamed as the flames fell low.

Dalimi watched Bobakin bank the fire, “Why did they assume the girls would return the next day? I don’t understand.”

Bobakin yawned, but despite his fatigue, had no desire to sleep; “I suppose you were too young when you left the village to remember the Schump raids. Only one happened in the seven years I lived there.

“The Schumps would arrive during the day, but I heard that sometimes it was by night, and they would raid all the houses. They stole all the women.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know. But after a day, the women would return, sad and weeping, but otherwise unharmed.” His sad orange eyes brightened suddenly with a new realization, “I suppose that’s how we were born.” He was old enough, now, to begin to understand those things.

“You mean that’s how we’re half-Schump, half-human? They gave the mothers something to make the children Schump?”

“Yeah,” he said cryptically, “something like that.”

The next morning Bobakin, Denmin, and Nappy set out with the three boys. For the first time in seven years they set foot in the Terrible Forest. Bobakin left Bebbin in charge, “Remember,” he told the handsome boy, “you’re the man of the camp. I knew

how to look after others when I was your age, now you take care of everyone; got it? I don't want any surprises here when I return."

"Don't worry, chief. Everyone's safe with me here."

Bobakin turned to go but then half turned around, "One more thing," he said, "Don't let Dalimi overwork herself."

Bebbin held his head high, "Got it."

The Terrible Forest was incredibly dense with animal tracks crisscrossing each other like a million salmon in a pond. The game was good but no one ever hunted there: this was Schump territory. The woods went deeper and deeper, and the light barely shone through the cracks in the high treetops. Nappy asked Feirk how they ever found the Schump village, and Feirk answered that the tracks the beasts left were obvious. The Schumps were not afraid of human attack, and did not guard against it.

At one point, Nappy bent low to the ground. "What is it?" asked Bobakin. He knew Nappy always did everything for a reason.

"Stearn Flower. I have an idea," he gathered the blossoms and tucked them in his shirt against his breast. Then, when they passed a pond, he made a leaf cup and drew some water.

Finally they reached the village. As silent as they were all accustomed to be, they made no noise as they crouched behind some bushes and observed the feared and unknown enemy.

The beasts were unruly, loud, and ferocious. They were wild looking: the orange of their eyes was not the mild sparkling of the Halfbreeds but a fierce light that shone like a hungry beast's. Their green hair was dark with mud and clay and stuck up all over

their heads. All the male Schumps had beards down to their naked, swollen bellies. They all walked like apes, with overlong arms hanging near to the ground, and their knees bent up to their elbows. Bobakin saw that there was a bit of writing on one of the buildings. It seemed to be the main hut, for it was largest and near the center. Although the day was hot, and fires burned all through the camp grounds, the large hut fumed smoke from a hole in its roof.

Then he saw Bahia. She was still as he remembered: she hadn't changed. The same round face and curly green locks. Ruddy red cheeks and thick dark eyebrows.

"There's Bahia!" cried Nappy in a hushed tone, "She's cleaning that deer hide."

"We have to get to her," said Cornanam, "let her and the others know we've come to help them."

"I'll go," said Bobakin.

"No!" said Nappy, "You don't look enough like a Schump."

Feirk took a deep breath, "I do."

Nappy looked him up and down: he had bowed legs, green hair, and orange eyes. "Yes," Nappy nodded, "you'll do."

Feirk stripped off his clothing until he was as naked as a Schump, rubbed mud in his hair to make it stand erect, and stood before the others for inspection.

"You're skin is too red," said Cornanam; "they have fairer skin."

Nappy pulled out the Stearn plant and crushed it in his cup of water. The water turned opaque and white. "Here you go," he rubbed the plant on the reddest parts of Feirk, and they all inspected him again.

"Say! It worked!" said Dishan.

Nappy smiled quirckily, "They don't call me the Wiseman for nothing."

It was dark when Feirk returned, hobbling in the darkness like an ape. The others were sitting, waiting for him, "Did you find her?" asked Bobakin.

"All three. They can't leave – the Schumps won't let them."

"We already knew that," said Cornanam sharply.

"We suspected they were prisoners, but now we know," said Nappy. "Now we can proceed, knowing that they will come willingly."

Cornanam stood angrily, "Of course they'll come willingly! Why are we waiting? Let's go."

Bahia bent over the fire, watching carefully the entry to the mud hut behind her. She hated that Schump. More than she had ever hated before: her entire being boiled with wrath and useless rage. But with outward meekness, she stirred the fire and put on the pot. She would have liked to think that this outward meekness stemmed from the knowledge that this nightmare would soon be over – (that soon, she would be reunited with Cornanam and all would be as it was before). But that was untrue. Her fiery spirit and open attitude had been twisted out of her and now there was only meek obedience. The Schump, with his blows and grunts and violations, had cowed her. There was a part of Bahia that died there in that camp: an independence, an innocence, never to be regained.

A whistle came. The sky was dark with only the red light of the fires illuminating the camp, but Bahia knew the signal. She had told Feirk to give it.

Stealthily, she made her way to Fichia's tent, which was the closest to the borders of the wood. Bousia met them there.

"Where are the guys?" asked Fichia.

"I can't see them yet," said Bahia, "but they're there."

"I'm scared," quivered Fichia in a whisper, "what if our guys don't win? And the Schumps keep us?"

"They won't," said Bousia feircely. She had not been cowed by her captors.

"That's right," came a voice beside them, "we're getting you out of here." Bahia looked at Bobakin. He was so tall.

"This way," he said, and they made their way into the forest. But before they went twenty feet, a roar sounded in the camp behind them.

"They know!" cried Fichia.

Bobakin urged them on, "It's alright," he said, "they're being taken care of."

They went as quickly as it is possible to go when traveling through a thickly wooded, black forest. But after about two hours, they emerged onto the road that led to the village.

"We'll wait here," said Bobakin, "we'll wait for the others."

The chill night offered an excuse to curl into a ball and cling to one's own miserable self. Bahia's mind wandered as she lay there in the thicket next to the road.

"This is where we met Denmin," she said quietly, "and the Bullbeast happened."

"That was a long time ago," answered Bobakin from the blackness.

"Ages. Lifetimes."

"It's all over now."

She thought about that but did not know what he meant. She knew what she thought about it, and she agreed with his statement. But was that what he was thinking?

There was a rustle in the thicket, and the others emerged.

“Cornanam,” breathed Bahia with her arms upheld, and he gathered her into his own. Firm but tender, he held her to himself, and she began to weep. Supported in his strong arms, all the fears and trials and pain rose and overflowed; he would never understand the misery of the past five days but that did not matter. He had come, he was here now, and that was enough.

Chapter 2 – Morgan

Liael was collecting rocks from the stream bank and piling them into pretty little houses. She liked to pretend that the Halfbreeds had a village just like the humans, and with her little sticks and stones, she built up households in her imagination.

“Daddy will be home soon,” she lilted in a false soprano, making one tall stick speak to two smaller ones. She had often plied Denmin for as many facts about village life as he could dredge up from his memory, putting those memories to use in her mind, making up homes and families.

“I wish Daddy would take me hunting!” cried one of the little sticks.

A tall shadow fell across Liael, shutting out the bright sunlight. “That’s a nice little family you got there,” remarked a strange, deep voice.

Liael looked up to see a strange human man standing over her. She screamed in terror and bolted back to camp.

“There’s a man, there’s a man, there’s a man!” she screamed out until she ran against Nappy and clung to him for dear life.

Bobakin ran over, “A man? A strange man?”

“Maybe it was Cornanam,” said Nappy, one arm protectively around the little girl, the other fingering his knife. Cornanam’s small troupe had left a few weeks ago but with promises to drop by now and again, but maybe Liael would not recognize him.

“No, no! He was strange and old and a human.”

“Where Liael?” asked the Halfbreed leader, “where did you see him?”

“Sorry!” called a cheerful voice, “I didn’t mean to startle her.”

Immediately, he was welcomed with the sharp, deadly points of spears. “Whoa!” the stranger exclaimed, defensively and uncertainly raising his unarmed hands, “no trouble. Really. Just passin’ through.” He was not really old: late thirties, maybe, with a crop of healthy brown hair, sparkling green eyes, and a skinny, but athletic physique.

“You’re a human,” said Bobakin, who himself was not holding a weapon. But he didn’t have to. A word, a gesture, a signal from him to any one of the other children, and the man would be dead. “Return to your own kind and leave us in peace. We have never threatened your people, and you have left us alone. We’ll keep it that way. Now go.”

“Hey. I don’t want any trouble either. I just thought – I mean, you look human to me.”

“What world are you from?” Denmin demanded incredulously, his orange eyes flashing.

The man shook his head and slowly lowered his arms, seeming to notice for the first time the little differences that set these children apart, “One very far away from here. And very different.”

Stretching her back after stooping over the soup, Dalimi looked with hooded eyes towards where Bobakin, Denmin, and Nappy were sitting with the human stranger. She did not trust humans and hated having one in the camp. To add insult to injury, Bobakin had commanded that she feed him. But curiosity is a stronger force than hate, so the pretty little girl, on carrying the food over to the men, perked up her ears and listened with deliberate attentiveness.

“Why not?” she heard Nappy say.

“I’m not sure,” answered the man. He had said his name was Morgan, “I’ve never heard of them, but they sound fascinating.”

No one knew what that word meant, but it seemed as if this man liked their description of the Schumps. Denmin said angrily, “They’re not fastining, they’re evil. To humans and Halfbreeds. No one should ever go near them.”

“Isn’t it possible they are simply savages? With the possibility to be domesticated and educated? Perhaps, despite they’re evil ways, they are actually rational creatures.”

This time Morgan saw just how completely lost the children were with his big words and ideas. He attempted to explain, “If the Schumps have never been around

people who think, who worship God, or who teach they're children how to read and write, then perhaps they live the way that they do because they don't know any better."

Nappy was squinting his eyes, with his thinking face on, and Denmin hardly knew how to process these queer theories. Bobakin was saying nothing: Dalimi tried but could not tell what he was thinking.

Nappy spoke, "I don't know how to read or write, and I don't worship God. But I don't act like a Schump. None of us do. They're just plain evil."

"They don't try to be good. Maybe if they tried, they could be better." This came from Denmin, and Morgan looked at him in surprise.

"That's correct," said Morgan, "If they were taught..."

But Denmin shook his head, "No. We weren't taught, but we figured out how to be good, and we try. And we try to help the younger ones know how. That was all on our own, without humans and without Schumps. They are just plain evil." Then abruptly, he stood and walked away.

Bobakin seemed to notice Dalimi for the first time. "Dalimi, this is a private talk. Go away."

"Please Bobakin. I'll be ever so quiet."

"I said go, and I meant it," he commanded roughly; so reluctantly, she put down the food and departed slowly. After she was out of earshot, Bobakin leaned in close to Morgan.

"I don't know what you're trying to do to my people," he said (he had never called them that before – 'my people' – but it sounded right: he knew it was true. They were his people, and he was responsible for them), "but if you convince them that Schumps

aren't evil, they will be in great danger. We survive here by avoiding the Schumps and taking care of our own life. If my people start leaving to teach the Schumps how to 'be good', they will be mercilessly killed, captured, or worse. You will say nothing more about it except to me and Nappy."

"Fair enough. I'm not here to cause trouble. I don't understand you're ways yet, but I want to learn, and I'm sorry for causing a stir. Sometimes an outside opinion can do that to a close-knit community."

"You can't stay here tonight," said Bobakin, "but you can come back tomorrow, and we will talk again."

"Thank you," said Morgan, "I will."

"Why did you ask him to come back?" demanded Nappy when Morgan had left.

"He's different from us. Not just us Halfbreeds but anyone. And he knows nothing about us. I don't agree with what he says, but he is different, and I want to know why. For some reason, I want to talk to him. It's important"

"Just so long as by talking to him you don't agree with him."

"Schumps are evil," said Bobakin emphatically and decidedly, "nothing will ever change my mind about that."

Denmin made his way into the forest to the clearing. There he curled up on the giant rock in the center and hugged his knees. But he could not stay still long and soon was pacing about the clearing, randomly kicking stones out of his path and intermittently pushing hard against a tree trunk.

“Grrraw!” he cried and threw a stone far away amongst the trees.

The young boy, who once could be so inconsistently level-headed and yet impetuous, had grown into a rugged, strong young man of seventeen. He seemed to be one of those lucky creatures who skip the awkward stages of youth and transform instantly into a full-grown person. But while his outward appearance breathed maturity and common sense, his heart was passionate, and his mind still young. It was not surprising that romance had blossomed between him and Bousia when first they met. Though only together two short days, before her group headed back to its home with promises to return, the two youths had bonded deeply, and sworn their love for one another. Amongst their many conversations, Bousia had related to him the horror experienced by the girls in the Schump camp. His ardent love, the feeling of invincibility natural to all young men, and ultimately a strong sense of justice, all combined in the impetuous young man, swirling within his breast the desire to wreak vengeance upon the evil Schumps. But the thought of the lives taken the night of the rescue, and Bousia’s appeals to ‘not do something rash’, appeased his wounded sensibilities, and allowed him, at the time, to let it go.

But now, with Morgan questioning whether these evil creatures were really evil, all those feelings were resurfacing and overwhelming him.

Chapter 3 – The Confusion of Truth

The hot midday sun pounded hard drum beats upon the scorched, yellowing grasses. The Bullbeast circled its pen like a caged tiger, half mad with the heat and railing against the world. His life was solitary and mundane, but being an irrational creature, he did not know that life could be different. He did not remember the freedom of stalking a coy deer, or the instinctual fear and prowess that attends self-preservation: the heightened use of every sense, the tingling on the spine when high winds threatened or the rivers were overflowing. The racing of the heart when Schump's flesh was on the air.

The Bullbeast was old. So very old. More had he forgotten in the span of centuries than man's history remembered. Ancient and venerable – and domesticated. Men still feared his vicious teeth and mighty claws; his ivory tusks and brute force; but the fierce green light of a wild beast was faded and almost forgotten.

Morgan had been in and out of the Halfbreed's camp for several weeks now. He was a favorite among the little ones and a welcome hunting partner for the young men. More than that, though, he was a constant source of confusion and confrontation for Bobakin.

The young leader found his ideas novel and challenging, interesting and yet, oddly dangerous. Sometimes, all his instincts urged him to drive Morgan far away, to command his instant death if ever he returned. But something always held him back. He did not understand it but, with extreme caution, he trusted both sentiments and weighed them carefully.

The morning of the hot sun, Bobakin and Morgan were in the clearing, deeply engaged in one of their discussions.

"Many cultures began as small tribes, just like your manner of living," said Morgan. "What determined their survival, and eventual civilization, was brute force. Who was the greater chieftain? They determined this by going to war and conquering other tribes. Until eventually, the best tribe was the biggest and fiercest.

"But you all do not seem governed by this principle of the jungle."

"Principle of the Jungle?" asked Bobakin.

"The principle of brute force. You know, survival of the fittest. No, you are peace seeking. You have no desire to assert dominance. It's very rational of you: surprisingly so. Very diplomatic."

"I don't think it's surprising."

“Why is that?” Morgan always found Bobakin’s insights uniquely profound and intriguing.

“We have no desire to live with the Schumps even if we enslaved them. And we have no desire to live with humans. There are no other Halfbreed tribes. Not near us. And we don’t want trouble. We have too much with the Schumps and humans already, and now we just like to be left alone. That was our fight, and we got it. We survive because we try hard, not because we’re the best or fittest. Because we’re not: we have too much Schump blood.”

“Schump blood makes you evil?”

“Schump blood makes it harder for us to be good. So we fight against it: inside. And when Schumps enter our lives, we kill them on the outside.”

“And what about humans?”

“What about them?”

“Are they evil or good?”

Bobakin did not immediately answer. He knew the reply that had lain on his heart his entire life, but Morgan’s many ideas and constant questions had led Bobakin to doubt his own beliefs. “It would seem that if Schumps are evil, and humans hate Schumps (even half Schumps), then they are good.”

“Everything is very black and white for you, isn’t it? The only gray area is your own life. And yet, that seems to keep you all in a state of higher intellectualism and sensitivity. Very odd and very interesting. Not a bad way, I begin to think.” When Morgan talked like that, it was more to himself than to the young man, and Bobakin had learned to ignore the remarks. They were unintelligible and slightly annoying.

“Then, when the humans try to kill you all,” continued Morgan, “they do nothing wrong?”

“Maybe,” said Bobakin, “but we are also half-human, and it is wrong to kill a human. So I think it is some wrong, some right. And so it is some right that we Halfbreeds stay alive, and all wrong if we hate or kill humans. So we avoid them, and leave them alone.

“You said, one day, something about God.”

“Yes?”

“What is that?”

“He’s an idea, a figure. Something that domesticated peoples acknowledge as the driving force behind nature.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He’s a spirit.”

“A what?”

“An invisible force that has influence over the earth.”

“You know I don’t understand it when you use big words.”

“I don’t think I can explain with simple language.”

“That’s silly,” scoffed Bobakin, “language is language. If I can’t understand it, then it’s not worth understanding.”

Morgan shrugged. The boy certainly had unique and amusing ideas of life.

The next day, trekking through the woods hunting, Bobakin asked Denmin about God. Since Denmin was so much older when he left humans, the Halfbreeds often

deferred complicated questions to him, hoping that anything he didn't know would be compensated by his status as the Niceman, for that position bequeathed him wisdom.

"Yeah, I heard of God," said Denmin. "There was a church in my village."

"We had a church too," said Bobakin, "what's that to do with God?"

"It's where the humans worshipped him."

"What is he?"

"Well, I don't know much. He made everything, and he loved everything, and he was very good. I think the humans are good because they worship him."

"What does that mean? 'Worship'?"

"Um. I don't know. I guess, they talked big words to him and asked him to help them. I don't really know."

"So he lived in the church?"

"No. You couldn't see him. He was everywhere, but no one ever saw him."

"He must have been huge."

"Maybe. But he was a man."

"What?"

Denmin remembered vague images long forgotten. He used to like Church. It was warm, and there was pretty music. There was a woman there who gave him food. But now, an image of something was verging on the edge of his mind: of a man, a statue: the man was dead and bloody and very sad. People prayed to him, as well as the invisible God.

"He was a man, but someone killed him. I think that's why he's invisible now."

"So he's no good for anything?"

“Humans thought he was.”

“You told me big words, but he was just a man!” Bobakin thus accosted Morgan in the clearing that evening. “Explain worship, and church, and the dead man.”

“Where did you hear about that?”

“Doesn’t matter. One of my people remembered, so explain.”

“Well, some people think God was a man named Jesus who lived four thousand years ago. He was God made man, come to the earth to save mankind from his evil nature.”

“That’s why humans are good, not evil,” supplied Bobakin in a rapt, attentive voice, and Morgan, surprised again and chiding himself for it, continued,

“He taught people to be good, and gave them rules to follow to make them good. But some humans didn’t like goodness, so they killed him. When they killed him, they killed goodness.”

Bobakin flushed up to his ears, “Humans killed goodness?”

“That’s how the story goes. But it says that after three days, Jesus rose from the dead and then returned to his place as God, only human as well.”

But Bobakin was still concentrating on the death of the man, “Humans killed one of their own? A man who was goodness? They killed him?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe it!!” The young man rose in a flush of hot temper, and his deep voice bellowed in anger. “Humans are good! They don’t kill goodness.”

“Humans do many monstrous things, Bobakin. That is the reality of life.”

“No! I don’t like it. I don’t believe it.”

“We don’t always like truth. Nor is it necessary that we believe it.”

Bobakin cast him a look that revealed in a moment all the vulnerability, innocence, and youthful disillusionment that possessed his simple soul. Morgan, for the first time since arriving in their camp, felt a deep pang of conscience for rousing such confusion in the depths of a beautiful soul.

Without another word, Bobakin went back to camp.

“What’s the matter?” Dalimi knew Bobakin, and she could tell when he was upset. “Is it Morgan?”

He scrunched his face into a scowl. It was a look unfamiliar to Dalimi. He looked like a pouty little child, almost as if he was rebelling against a higher authority, and it bewildered her. “I don’t know what’s true anymore. I’m confused, and I don’t like it.”

“He’s lying.”

He looked at her with puzzled but steady eyes, “No, he’s not. Actually, I think he knows even more; even more than what he tells me. I want to know everything.”

“Why is it important? I don’t understand.”

Bobakin looked at the little red head whose vivid blue eyes were like sparkling crystals. She was so responsible, so sensitive, so concerned. To his surprise, he realized that their relationship had begun to fill a hole in his heart: a hole eating away at him ever since Bahia left. “I want you to come with me,” he said suddenly, “I think it would be good for you to hear what he says.”

The two of them found Morgan still in the clearing, obviously lost in thought. He smiled when he saw them, “You’ve brought the girl with the icy gaze, I see. The one who doesn’t trust me.”

“Most of us don’t trust you,” she responded, with a tone that justified Morgan’s ‘icy’ adjective.

“She’s going to listen,” said Bobakin. “I want you to tell me everything you know: about humans, and God, and history, and good and evil.”

Morgan laughed incredulously, both at the sudden change in Bobakin’s manner, and the incredible load he was requesting. “That’s going to take a long time.”

“Then we should start now.”

Chapter 4 – Denmin Does Something Rash

Bobakin was spending too much time with that Morgan. In the morning, he would hunt with Denmin and Nappy and a few of the other boys, but as soon as they returned and had eaten, he and Dalimi left camp to spend all day in conversation with Morgan. They were talking about Schumps, humans, and God, and church, and animals, and love, and other strange things that they already knew enough about. The Halfbreeds didn't need anyone to tell them more: they needed their leader back. At least, that was how Denmin felt.

He was lost without Bobakin; it never would have occurred to him that Bobakin was unfit to be the leader; Denmin had no mutinous aspirations. He loved Bobakin as a beloved older brother, and he respected him. But there was a fiery anger within his heart, and it was boiling inside to a breaking point. He centered his anger and blamed it on Morgan. Morgan was the root and cause of the evil inside him, and he must leave. But he was human, and within the favor of Bobakin, and that made him untouchable.

The reason Denmin thought Morgan a threat was because of the stranger's misconceptions about Schumps. He thought Schumps could be *good*. That was an evil, twisted thought, and Denmin decided to show him that truth. If only Morgan could see a Schump, he would know then – he would see at a glance – that they were truly wicked creatures, without any desire or appreciation for goodness. And so Denmin formed a plan to show Morgan a Schump.

Bebbin was nine years old, tall, and intelligent for his age. He was skinning a rabbit by the firepit when Denmin found him.

“Want to go for a hunt?” asked the elder boy of the younger.

“Can I?!” Bebbin didn't always get to go on hunts. He was still young.

“It's a special mission. Just you and me.”

Bebbin smiled, “I'd like that best.”

They set out and presently were in the thick of the forest. It was mid afternoon – not the best time for finding game. But Bebbin did not mind. He could see that Denmin wanted to be away from camp and was honored to be his chosen companion. But when they did not stop and an hour passed with Denmin pushing ever deeper, and deeper, and deeper into the thickening undergrowth, he began to be concerned.

“Denmin,” he said cautiously, “we're getting awfully close to Schumps territory.”

Denmin did not respond.

“Denmin,” he said, “where are you going?”

When Denmin still did not respond, he ran ahead and planted himself before him. He looked the young man squarely in the eye. There was no fear in the little boy's face, just confusion and wonder.

“Why are you going to the Schumps?”

“We have to catch one.”

Bebbin caught his breath, but his gaze did not falter, “Why?”

“To show Morgan.”

Bebbin nodded slowly. It was an idiotic idea, and Bebbin, had he stopped to think of it, would have known it to be so. But Denmin was steadfast in his purpose, and he had chosen Bebbin to accompany him. Bebbin squared his chest.

“Tell me what to do, and we can do this.”

They moved on again. Bebbin naturally supposed that they were both acting under Bobakin’s orders. After all, how could it not be so, when this was a responsibility and danger so great? And Denmin said nothing to disillusion the boy. Perhaps he did not stop to think that the young child was acting under false assumptions, but even that lack of discernment must be held against him, for he was allowing his frustration against Morgan and hatred of Schumps to cloud his responsibilities, and thus abuse his position as Niceman.

They never reached the Schump camp for they came across a straggler while still quite a distance out. Denmin could hear its presence before they could see it, and he and Bebbin hunched down in ambush.

“We will lure it to camp,” said Denmin, “awake, with his evil orange eyes glaring. But we must be cautious about it.”

When the Schump was in sight, they cautiously retreated, unseen, before it. They did it tactfully so that it sensed their presence and looked round, snuffing at the wind. It began to hunt them but really, they were hunting it.

Dalimi was a distance from the Rosenchanz barn, in the midst of the wild prairie that grew between the barn and the cornfields. It came up to her waist, and as she drifted through the waving grasses, she ran her hand along the top of them, feeling the soft, bewitching tickle and letting it thrill her to her toes. She looked up at the sky, and studied its depth of blue, blue, blue – bluer than blue – deepness. She sighed. Sometimes the world was simple, made so much sense, was so purely chaste.

“What do you think?” she softly questioned the drifting clouds. “It’s all so, well, grown up,” she told the cornflowers at her feet. Suddenly, a Turkey erupted from hiding quite near her, and gobbling, flapped away. “I NEVER WANTED IT!” she yelled after him and then disentangled her skirt from some briars. “But he came, and now Bobakin is confused, and I’m confused, and Denmin is angry...and I’m angry. But not at Morgan. And not at Bobakin.” She walked quietly further into the prairie, “I guess,” she said but got no further, for running out of the woods on the other side of the wheatfield, making for the direction of the pens, was a Schump.

She screamed. Loud and long. It wasn’t on purpose, but she did not fight the instinct. There had never been a Schump in the open before: not that she had seen. He was terrifying, and she kept on screaming.

The next thing she knew, Bobakin was crying her name and was almost upon her; his bow was across his shoulder and his spear in his hand. “Dalimi! What is it?! What’s wrong? Dalimi!” She ran to him, and he caught her in his arms. Wordlessly, through her tears, she pointed, and Bobakin saw. But he saw more than that. He saw Denmin and Bebbin chasing it toward the pens.

“Go back to the barn!” he told Dalimi and made for the animal pens.

“No!” she screamed, watching him go, but he did not listen. As she stood there watching, frozen in fear to the ground, she was dimly aware of all the other boys from the barn racing past her.

The Schump made it to the pens and then turned on the two boys. Bobakin and the others were still a fair distance off. Denmin stopped when he was about twelve feet from the man-like beast. He stared at him, his fiery orange eyes blazing into the creature’s own orange wild ones. “You are a plague,” said the young man, “and it would be a great thing for anyone who wiped your race from existence. You are evil itself, and I hate you.”

Bebbin was beside him, ready to hurl his spear at a sign. The Schump was breathing heavily for it was winded from running: they had chased it some distance once they made their presence known. It was already wounded from where Bebbin’s arrow had hit him. His arms reached forward inadvertently, almost, as if they would snatch up the boys and tear them to pieces. But he made no action yet, for he was sizing them up and knew their weapons to be deadly. His snarl was terrifying: it was so irrational on a face that ought to have been.

Denmin could see that the others were almost upon them, and he could make out Morgan’s head towering above the others. The time had come.

“NOW!” he cried, and he and Bebbin hurled their weapons at it. The marks were true, and the boys sprang upon him. It was a cat and dog fight, so intermingled were they that no distinct bodies could be seen. The others were on the other side of the

pens now and the Bullbeast was wide awake. He was staring at the fight and something long buried in his primal heart was stirred – a desire awakened to fight thus for his prey. He pawed the ground with a single, restless movement.

With a mighty heave, the Schump broke free from the boys. One arm was missing, a great tear was across his face, and something was wrong with his leg, but he was tough and hurled himself through the pen's fence, breaking the wooden beams. He thought he had bested them, had gained his freedom....the Bullbeast waited not a second: in a single pounce, the Schump was reduced to naught but a rag doll lying between the paws of a lion.

Then the Bullbeast was plenty pleased with himself. And then he spied the doorway to his freedom and perked his ears as high as they could go. His lips lifted into a hideous, triumphant, wonderful grin, and for that one moment of sheer delight, he was alive.

Then he saw Bebbin.

"Come on, Bebbin," said Denmin, "let's go." But Bebbin could not release his gaze from the beast's.

"Bebbin," said Denmin, "come away slowly. He's had his kill, we've done what we came to do."

"He's dangerous," breathed Bebbin and there was a queer light in his eyes.

Denmin glanced at the beast, "Yes," he agreed, "but not to us."

Bebbin pulled out an arrow and strung it. "I will kill it," he said, and before Denmin could prevent it, he shot.

“NO!” cried Denmin and Bobakin and Nappy all together, for they knew. They knew much, and they knew it was wrong and it was impossible.

But the arrow was true. Bebbin shot where no hunter, long ago, had shot; he pierced through the skin just below the jaw, and Bebbin killed the Bullbeast.

Morgan was watching the children’s behavior with nervous terror and confusion. First they chase a frightening creature, presumably a Schump, out of the woods and corner it, and then attempt to murder it in cold blood. It escapes them into a pen of a beast far more – no, equally – frightening, where it is killed, much to the children’s satisfaction. Then this terrifying beast is free, but Bobakin and Denmin show no desire to best it: they would leave it alive. That was the most puzzling thing of all, that and Nappy’s reaction to the Bullbeast’s death. Nappy walked slowly over to Bebbin, where he was standing silently over his kill, and knelt down beside the boy. Gently, like a mother, he turned Bebbin’s face to look at him and there were tears in Nappy’s eyes. Tears. Why?

“You have killed him who was your greatest protector. You have killed yourself, for he only ever showed you love, but you murdered him like a Schump.”

“What do you mean?” asked Bebbin in fear, for he was greatly affected by Nappy’s manner.

“You do not remember,” said Nappy, and then he looked up at Bobakin, “but we do.”

“Like it was yesterday;” said Bobakin, “but it is no good staying here. Return to camp, everyone. There will be a tale around the fire tonight.”

Around the fire was told the now legend of the Salvation of Bebbin, and then the Tournament against the Bullbeast, and how it brought death to the Halfbreeds. Morgan listened attentively, and Bebbin wept. When the tale was over, the little children were sent to bed, and Morgan sat silently gazing into the fire, thinking about everything he had seen that day. Denmin came and stood before him.

“You saw the Schump today?”

Morgan looked up at him with respect, and perfectly concealed fear, “I saw the Schump today.”

Denmin nodded in satisfaction, “Then you know.”

“What do I know?”

“You know the danger. You know the evil.”

“It was not intelligent. And therefore incapable of good or evil.”

Denmin bristled. Unfortunately, he perfectly understood Morgan’s meaning. “I have evil. It is deep and it is powerful, and if I did not fight it, it would rise up and consume me. I am a Schump! And I refuse it! They don’t. They can’t. THEY ARE EVIL.”

“You hate them. Everything in you is consumed with hatred.”

“If we did not hate evil, we would not resist it. You don’t understand that. You think that everything has good and evil both, just like us, and the good should be found and the evil ignored. You are wrong. To ignore the evil is to give it victory.”

“To concentrate on it alone is to be already consumed by it. We must love the good, as well as hate the evil. Then we will find a balance.”

Denmin wanted to cry suddenly, but he did not. Instead, he leaned down and looked Morgan in the eye, "I hate you. But you are human and that is wrong. You confuse me." His eyes were pleading and questioning, "Why do I hate you?"

"I don't know. But that is a normal human thing to do. Sometimes, we hate people we don't understand. And that's ok. So long as we forgive them their eccentricities and seek to treat them with respect and dignity."

Denmin stood and took a deep breath. "I only understand some of that. I don't know if I agree with you. You use such big words. I don't know what it is to forgive, but I remember it has something to do with the Dead Man and Church. I think you're connected with him somehow. I wish I understood all this."

Morgan looked upon him with wonder, "There is so much about you I too do not understand. Perhaps we can help each other."

Chapter 5 – Daisies and the Peach Tree

Morgan remained with the Halfbreeds another two months, and then one morning he declared to Bobakin that he must return to his home.

“Will you come back soon?” Bobakin asked of him.

“No. My home is far away, beyond the borders of this land, and it is no simple task to go there and return hence. I have to report all that I have learned here, and consult with my colleagues. When I do return, I will probably not be alone.”

“You will bring others like you? Who do not hate Halfbreeds?”

“That is correct. My friends at home will be fascinated by your kind, truly overwhelmed, and will not believe all that I have to tell them – not at first. But eventually, they will yearn with all their hearts to know and understand you, and to help you.”

“How can they help us?”

“We will see. When I return, we will see. But we will never do anything without your consent.”

Bobakin nodded. “You have changed the way I see the world, and I’m not entirely sure I like everything you have taught me. But I do like the man I have become, and that can not be a bad thing. And all that you have taught me, even when I rebelled against it, if it was truth, then it was better to know than to not know. I thank you for that.”

Then Morgan laughed heartily, “You have said everything I wanted to say to you, and better than I ever could have. For truly, we have affected and changed one another. My thanks go out to you.” And with deep humility, Morgan bowed from the waist.

“This is a mark of respect,” he said.

So Bobakin bowed to him, “In that case, I return it,” said the young man.

Dalimi watched Morgan leave (the little children running after him as far as they could) and breathed a deep sigh. Denmin was behind her and heard it.

“Are you relieved?” he asked.

“Yes. And no. I will miss him, but I do want things to go back to how they had been.”

“They won’t.”

“I know. And so I am sad.”

Outwardly, life returned to normal in the camp, but the Halfbreeds were changed inside, and big thoughts and deep emotions were stirring as the children rapidly ascended toward adulthood.

Two months after Morgan's departure, Bahia and Cornanam's group arrived for a long expected visit. It was a meeting of long estranged friends, as if they had all known one another their entire lives. The men hunted, the woman kept house, and the children played: but it was all much more fun with company.

And then there was love.

There was a spiced peach tree that grew on the edge of the Halfbreed Camp, just within the edges of the forest. It seemed to symbolize intoxication, for it breathed its fragrance forth with an overpowering sweetness and beckoned its victims into its exhilarating perfume.

And the young people responded. Denmin and Bousia stole away from the Barn whenever possible, reveling in the joyous companionship of the other beneath that peach tree. They were neither secret nor embarrassed about their sentiments, having never been heartbroken in love, and they wholly trusted one another. Bousia bared aspects of her soul never revealed to anyone, and Denmin confided secret thoughts he never knew he could think; together they grew and matured, reaching their hands up high to the sky and seeming even to touch it.

One day, they had a fight. Bousia had been waiting for Denmin in their allotted place, but he did not come. She waited long, and worried, and fretted, but still he did not come. It was not until the sun had disappeared over the horizon and the moon risen over the peach blossoms, that she heard a rustling, and he appeared from the forest.

She yelled at him. He was perfectly healthy, alive, and strong, and that enraged her. She cried out at him that he had left her waiting with no regard to her feelings, her

fears, her fantasies. Denmin stared at her wide-eyed in surprise. She told him she thought he'd been hurt! Denmin (poor ignorant boy) naively observed that he was safe.

“Yes! Safe and healthy and perfectly able to show up here! But you didn't!! Better you *had* been injured! Better you were dead!”

“Well, maybe I'll just go off and die then!” he defied her.

“Do! See if I care!”

“I thought you loved me but obviously I was wrong! There is no love in your heart!” and with this unimaginative and feeble retort, he stormed back the way he had come. Truth be told, he had a handful of daisies in one fist which he had found in a little-frequented glade and had picked all for his love. But he had lost his way on the return and so was late. His pride thus assulted, however, he had little interest in defending his noble nature and instead flung the flowers away from him and threw himself upon the ground in a passion. He felt that his injured heart would burst.

Denmin's was a proud heart, but Bousia's was a fiery one. When he grew angry, he was too insulted to calm down again for a long while, but Bousia's fits of temper, while heated in the moment, cooled instantly upon reflection. So now, after thinking upon Denmin's last insult, and reflecting that she did indeed love him, she took herself in hand and set off to seek him out.

She found him not far, still lying with his face in the dirt, like a spoiled child. She was inclined to smile at his attitude, but was prudent enough to remain sober and inquire meekly, “Were those for me?”

He did not look up, “They were. But obviously you don't want them.”

She was determinedly silent, and finally, he looked up from curiosity. She was quietly regathering the flowers, and then turning to him, she offered them to Denmin.

And all was well.

Bobakin was not unaffected by the peach tree either. Ever since seeing Bahia again, the deep pain of separation buried within had, unwelcomed, returned to the surface of his heart. Now he saw her in the close company of another fellow: his heart ached, his eyes followed, and his dreams were vivid. Damili watched with patience and deep heartache: more for him than for herself. One evening, Bobakin returned early from hunting, while Cornanam was still deep in the forest, and sought out Bahia. She was stooping over the fire, cooking greens and laughing with Jenjen. Her sleeves were rolled up past her pudgy elbows and her green curls were gathered away from her red round face. There was nothing particularly romantic or bewitching in her appearance, nor anything delicate in her manner. Yet she had two young men in love with her.

Bobakin called to her, and she followed. They went to the glade and talked together.

“Do you remember the first time we found a berry bush?” asked Bobakin at one point.

“It was only a few days after taking in Brine,” she said, and she surprised herself. She hadn’t been able to say his name in all the time since leaving.

“Those were *really* good days. I miss them.”

Bahia looked at him hard, “You’ve changed you know. A lot.”

He smiled gently, “So have you. It’s a good change.”

“Maybe,” she assented reluctantly: “I know more than I did then. But I’m also a coward.” She saw he was about to protest, and added, “I’m not strong, Bobakin: not like you. I run away from pain.”

Bobakin was a wise, thoughtful young man now. He understood much and was more clearly able to discern good and evil in others. Now he looked at her sadly, “Pain is what makes you strong,” he said.

She nodded, “Sometimes. But sometimes it just makes you more dependent. As it has with me. You can run away from pain, but you can’t escape it. And I certainly haven’t.”

“I wish I had been there for you.”

“You wouldn’t-...never mind. It’s in the past now. And we can’t change it. I think everything happened the way it was supposed to, though. And my life isn’t terrible, Bobakin; in fact, it has a lot of good things in it.”

“Like Cornanam?”

She smiled, and her eyes were suddenly far away, happy and contented. “Yes,” her voice vibrating bliss, and Bobakin bit his lip. He exhaled, and with that breath went his loves and dreams and hopes, for they were nothing when faced with her happiness. He stood abruptly and looked away into the trees, and Bahia, who knew him once so well, and could never lose that knowledge completely, now saw how it was for him.

“You know that I love you, right? That I always have?” she asked him beseechingly.

“It’s just...” he did not look at her, “I always thought we’d be forever. I guess I never really gave up on that until now.”

“I thought so too,” she said, and tears welled into her eyes, “And it was what I wanted. Not in the grown up way, but because you were my best friend and I loved you more than any one else. I never wanted to leave you.”

“When you left, you said you didn’t know if you loved me.”

“I didn’t know...then. I was hurting too much. But I know now that I have always loved you, and never stopped. You were my brother, my family, the first who ever loved me no matter what, and who I loved back. You will be in my heart forever.”

“With Cornanam?” he asked bitterly, although he tried not to let her hear the sting. He could not stand the thought of being equated with another man.

“No.” she answered, “Cornanam holds a different place in my heart. His place is broader: but yours is deeper. For you know things of me that he never will.”

Now Bobakin turned to look at her, and she had tears on her cheeks. He reproached himself for making her cry, but she stood up and held out her arms, and comforted his wounded heart.

Presently, they returned to camp, and from then on they held no more private conferences. For they had said what was necessary to know what was on the other’s heart, and now they could put it behind them, forgive, and move forward.

Chapter 6 – New Home

When Cornanam and his group had been at the Barn a few weeks, Feirk one day noted to Nappy just how crowded the place was. Nappy agreed.

“There’s more and more of us every year,” said the Wiseman, “on good nights, we sleep by the campfire to breathe freer.”

“You know,” said Feirk, “We’ve built ourselves some houses at our camp. We could show you all how to do the same.”

Nappy widened his eyes with eager interest, “Houses like the humans?”

“Pretty close. Not as good yet, but we get better at it every time.”

Nappy eagerly agreed, and the two set off into the woods to mark out trees to fell, and plan the type of roofing needed. They got so into the planning that they forgot to mention it to anyone else, and presently forgot that they’d neglected to ask Bobakin’s permission. So, at dinner, when Bobakin overheard Nappy say, “The door will have to

have hinges. How do we manage those?” Bobakin naturally inquired what the door was for.

“Houses! We want to build houses like the humans.”

Bobakin blinked in surprise, “Is that a good idea?”

“Oh, sure!” said Feirk, “we’ve built a couple already.”

“Sure,” said Bobakin, “But you don’t live so near a human village. Perhaps they would not like the idea of us building so close to them.” He was thinking of stories told him by Morgan: stories of conflicts arising about property and land disputes. He did not want trouble with the humans.

“We really do need something besides just the barn, Bobakin,” said Nappy, “Soon, we won’t all fit anymore. Even now, it’s tight.”

“I agree,” said Bobakin, “perhaps it’s time we thought about moving.”

Dalimi looked up quickly from her dinner, “Move?! From the Barn? Where would we go?”

“I don’t know. But I think I like the idea. We’ve lived under the shadow of the human village long enough. It’s time we made a life for ourselves.”

Dalimi didn’t know if she liked the idea altogether, but she knew her tendency to oppose change, regardless of whether it was good or bad. So she decided to wait before saying anything, and trust Bobakin.

The men set out to look for a new home.

While they were gone, Fichia noticed Dalimi's silence and the worry that creased between her eyes, "Are you alright?" she asked her. Dalimi smiled but it was a poor attempt. "Are you afraid of leaving?" Fichia pursued.

"Yes, I suppose so. I've been here ever since a very little girl and I don't know anything else. We get by here with clothes stole from the village, food found nearby in the forest, and a building built before any of us were born. To abandon all that: it would be to abandon our way of life. How would we eat? Stay safe in storms? How would we clothe ourselves? I don't know if Bobakin has even asked himself those questions."

"Our group already gets by without them," said Fichia; "we make our clothes from cloth thrown away by villages. We build our own homes. And there will always be food. Bobakin wouldn't take you where there wasn't any."

"I know that. I suppose, I mean...I guess I'm just afraid. But moving can be good: it was when I was a child, so it may be so now."

Fichia smiled, and then began to teach Dalimi how to sew and piece together old clothing into new.

Bobakin presently found a place quite a ways distant from the barn. He and Fierk scouted it out and decided it was a safe distance from any known Schump camps, and so they began to build.

It was intoxicatingly fun. Cornanam, Fierk, and Dishan already had the skill, and Bobakin's group brought the manpower. In no time at all, three huts had been erected, and Dalimi and Jenjen had begun to move everything from the barn to the new village. They decided to call it Goodness, for Nappy and Denmin and Bobakin felt it represented

their way of life and what they were always fighting for. “And also,” said Nappy, “It is *good* to have our own home.”

The huts were arranged in a circle, with a small mound in the center, topped with a roof but no walls. That was to be their meeting place and common area, for none of the huts were quite big enough to fit everyone.

Bobakin, Nappy, and Denmin all moved into one hut together. Jenjen and Dalimi lived in another with a few of the little girls, and Bebbin and the younger boys slept together. Their guests they put in the two remaining huts. But they decided they could spread out when the guests left.

As Denmin stood back at the end, and admired the five huts and the center mound, his heart swelled with accomplishment, and he went to find Bousia. With a new thought on his mind, he was standing taller than he had ever stood before.

“Bousia!” he called to her, and she followed him to a private space. “Bousia,” he said again, looking at her with sparkling eyes and a serious face, “You know that I love you.”

She smiled and took his hand. Her lively blue eyes danced back at his.

“You know that I love you,” he said exuberantly, “and now we have a village. A real place to live. Bousia, I don’t want you to leave with Cornanam. I want you to stay here with us. I want us to have our own hut, all to ourselves, and live together forever! Please, my lovely,” he said, “what do you think?”

And though she hadn’t known it, she had been waiting for him to ask just such a question. Now she kissed him and told him she loved him, and said forever sounded just right to her.

So, hand in hand, they ran back to the village, to where Bobakin and Cornanam were talking, and stood before them, and professed their intentions.

“I want everyone to know how much I love Bousia, and that I want to be with her forever. I want the whole town to hear us promise love to each other!” said Denmin, carried away with the excitement as he was.

Bobakin agreed and said that they would have a party, and everyone should clean himself, and dress with flowers, and meet on the mound in the middle of the day tomorrow, for Bousia and Denmin to promise to love each other forever.

Cornanam heard all this and said nothing to oppose it; but hearing Denmin profess his intentions for Bousia, a desire began to grow in his heart, and he went in search of Bahia.

“Bahia,” he said, “we will love each other forever, right?”

“Of course!” she answered in surprise, “Do you doubt it?”

“Well, we’ve never said so, and sometimes we fight and I storm off, and I see the way Bobakin looks at you and I wonder if there is anything to keep you from leaving me...”

She stopped him with a kiss, and said, “Bobakin does not hold my heart as you do. What more would you ask of me than that?”

He told her of Denmin and Bousia. “I think it’s a good idea,” he said, “I think we should do it. Not because I don’t trust you, but because of what Denmin said: that he wants everyone to know how much he loves. I love that much and more.” Bahia smiled and agreed.

So the next day, when the sun was highest in the sky and smiled down upon newly erected buildings, showering its warmth upon dancing green heads, Bahia and Bousia adorned themselves with necklaces and wreaths and crowns of flowers: blue and red, yellow and green, white and purple, veritable rainbows of beauty. The others also adorned themselves, and they all went to the mound where Bobakin was waiting. He had thought hard about how to do this thing, remembering vague Morgan ideas about something called a wedding: but he remembered very little.

So when they came, he simply had Bahia and Cornanam, and Bousia and Denmin stand close together. Then he asked Denmin if he loved Bousia. Denmin said yes.

“Will you love her forever? Until you die?” asked Bobakin.

“Yes. Until I die, and longer,” said Denmin.

“Will you love Denmin until you die?” he asked Bousia.

“Yes,” she answered, “and longer.”

Then he did the same with Bahia and Cornanam, and when he was finished, Denmin (who was still overflowing with excitement), took the wreath from his head and threw it in the air and shouted for gladness. Then all the Halfbreeds did the same, and the village echoed with sounds of joy. They sang and they ate and they danced, and never before had so much happiness abounded in the camp of Halfbreeds.

Chapter 7 – A Study in Humanity

Nappy was not caught up in the love fever that seemed to rage all through the village of Goodness. He had always been a calm, level-headed fellow, with a knack for observation and detail, and a serious, feeling soul. He always wanted to know more, and had never been angry at Morgan – even when the strange man’s revelations had run contrary to Nappy’s own observations. Knowledge was knowledge, and as the Wiseman, it was his responsibility to know all that he could.

He reflected to himself in his owlish way (meaning that he curled himself on a stump or a rock alone on the edge of the forest, and thought wisely) that Morgan had studied the Halfbreeds in order to understand them. Nappy liked that idea and thought that perhaps he ought to study the humans. Of course, he could not live among them, that was not an option he even desired, but to observe them quietly from a distance,

knowing the ins and outs of their society, and understanding just exactly what motivated them was an enticing idea for a study.

And thus began Nappy's Great Venture.

It went on much longer than he ever anticipated, and, to his surprise, he found that he enjoyed it immensely. Humans were a 'fastinating case study', as he knew Morgan would say. With their rituals and mundane lives, and jealousies and families.

Presently, he even began to write down his observations. Bobakin may have been Morgan's most apt philosopher, but Nappy had been his letterman, and it was with great pride that Morgan had watched the young boy drink in the writing lessons the older man taught him. Now, Nappy began keeping a notebook.

"It seems," he wrote, "that ups and downs are for everything. For the cold and hot seasons It is the same for humans. Hot and cold feelings and days. One day a man is happy and the next he is very sad. Sadness is funny but I think I know what makes it. It is when the day is different than it was in our dream the night before. I think in our sleep we expect it to be one way but when we wake up and the sky is different or our friends are different then sadness which is actually in fact disappontidness is there. Many human men get disappontid a lot. And women too. But mostly children. But they get happy again fast. Maybe because they dream during the day."

Thus his journal ran on, with speculations, and observations, and little critiques of mankind. Bobakin was worried about his activities at first, and questioned his friend extensively on his finds; but gradually he grew to accept Nappy's Great Venture, and appreciate the knowledge that came with it. Probably, before Morgan's arrival, he would have banned the Venture, haunted by misconceptions and vague superstitions of

mankind. But most of these had been eradicated through Morgan's stories and lessons, and now Bobakin saw humans as not so terrible and untouchable, though certainly still as dangerous. Therefore, with a warning to be careful and discreet, Bobakin allowed Nappy his eccentricity.

Nappy was sitting in the bough of a weeping fig, well concealed by the overspreading foliage, taking notes in his journal and thinking quietly to himself. He had an excellent view of the village, but it was a distance away, his tree located on the edge of one human family's property.

Presently, the daughter of the family (he knew her to be the eldest) made her way out to the tree and stood beneath it. Nappy did not mind: he had no intentions of leaving soon, so he sat silent and hoped she would not look up. She stood there some time, looking around once and awhile, sometimes smiling to herself, sometimes singing quietly. Nappy took notes of what she sang.

Picadillo Armadillo all is fanciful illusion

If I didn't then he wouldn't but I did and so he came

Pacarilla Sasparilla nothing is as what it seems

But yet I hoped and so I thought and all it is is inbetweens

Nonsense, of course, but Nappy liked the tune. She sounded happy, and he hoped she would sing some more. But just then she gave a whispered cry and ran out

from under the tree into the arms of a young man just arrived. He took her up and kissed her and spun her around, and they laughed and shushed each other.

“If mother knew,” she said.

“Your mother’s the one that wants us together,” he answered her.

She giggled, “Yes, but all the same; if she knew, she’d skin me alive.”

He looked fondly at her, “I don’t know if I can wait till next month.”

“What *shall* you do?” she asked him, melodramatically teasing.

“Go out of my mind,” he answered seriously.

But she coyly refused to be serious, “That’ll be entertaining. I wonder what our children will think?”

Their talk went on in this way for some time: with him whispering romantic love into her ear, and she, enjoying it hugely, laughingly throwing it back upon him. They were too happy to pay any attention to time, and as Nappy sat there, the evening turned to dusk, turned to night.

Nappy took great enjoyment in this tryst, and returned to catch a sight of it every night for two weeks. The lovers were approaching their marriage day and were overwhelmed with happiness. Nappy speculated, theorized, reasoned, and enjoyed with his whole heart. He compared this relationship with the ones he saw back at camp and found very few differences, except for this one ruling element: the ‘parents’, from whom the young people hid the intensity of their passion. He wondered why they slunk away at night and did not behave so around the adults – for whom they had such apparent love and yet an apparent fear. It was these relationships that puzzled the boy most, as it

had been the lack of an adult figure in the Halfbreed colony that most intrigued Morgan. We are confused doubters of what we do not know.

The wedding day approached, and Nappy was present for the ceremony. There, he gained intriguing ritual knowledge which he passed onto Bobakin later, wherein the vows were given, the wine drunk, the bottle crushed, songs sang, and dances danced. He enjoyed it immensely. But even more so, he relished the sight of the bride and groom, supremely happy in one another's arms, disappearing into their new, freshly built home. He wished them well.

Many months passed. The cold spell, known as winter, came and went, bringing with it discomfort and less food. The Halfbreeds learned to make better blankets, build a fire in the home, and wrap up warmly. There was a brief sickness that passed through the camp: the healthy ones pulling through all right, but two of the little children, weak from lack of food and the cold, passed away. It was a sad but common enough phenomenon for the Halfbreeds; so they sang dirges, buried the dead, and life continued.

One day toward the end of winter, Nappy wrapped himself in his fox coat, and returned to the human village to spy on his pet married couple. He climbed into his tree and watched the closed door. But all was not right. There was a hurrying and frowning behind the windows. The doctor went in and out over the course of the day, and the young bride was weeping in her mother's arms. Nappy wrote in his journal, "There is so much sadness, and there was before much Happiness! i do not think the humin girl will never be Happy again. Not when I see her cry up so much sadness. I never seen

anyone so sad as she is, and I want to cry with her. I cry when my friends dy, and the man was her friend. Is he ded?”

And as he watched, sure enough, he saw them carry out the groom and bury him, his widow standing near. And he saw her return alone to the house where she once was so happy.

Nappy could never decide afterwards why he did it, but it seemed the thing to do. So he did, and we will see what came of it. For much comes of our actions, careless or loving; they are like the little stones that begin an avalanche. That is what Nappy would learn but, despite all that came afterward, he never regretted it.

“I am sorry he is ded. He was a Niceman. He loved you, and you loved him, I could tell. Now you are sad – maybe forever. But maybe one day, it wont hurt so much.”

He wrote this, and in the dead of night, he slipped it under her door. In the morning, he saw her open the door and peer out into the street. Perhaps she thought it was a loving note of a little child, for she did not look worried, just curious and still sad.

A month later, for he was still watching her once in awhile, he wrote her another one. “I saw you smile yesterday. good. I am glad. but it was a different smile than it was before he would be glad to see you smile.”

To his unbounded astonishment, she slipped him a response under her door that night. It read thus, “I do not know who you are, my little angel. But you are looking out for me, and I am grateful. He would be too. Perhaps he sent you to take care of me with your words and little helpful advice. Don’t ever stop being so kind to those in need. You are a very good person.”

After that, Nappy began writing longer epistles. About things he saw in the forest, about his observations of human life; all as carefully worded as possible, to avoid being perceived for what he was. And she wrote him back. Her name, he discovered, was Marityme, and she was a weaver, which meant that she made cloth for clothes. She told him about it, and responded intelligently and philosophically to his many observations. By paying careful attention to how she wrote, his grammar and spelling quickly improved.

Finally, after a few months of this correspondence, Marityme wrote that she would like very much to meet him.

Nappy expressed reticence to this idea, stating that he did not much like being amongst people and did not know if she would like him when she met him.

“Nonsense,” she wrote back. “There will be no one but you and me, and we will have a lovely little chat together, I know. For, you see, I know you very well already, and we both know that Charles approves of you” (Charles was her late husband).

So Nappy asked that they meet outside beneath her fig tree and she agreed. “Nothing is ever the usual way, with you, is it?” she commented in her response, and Nappy thought, terrified, that she would soon know why.

When the day arrived, Marityme stood excitedly beneath the tree, waiting to meet whom she thought would be a young boy. “Where can he be?” she wondered aloud and to her astonishment, she heard a deep response from the above.

“I’m here,” and down dropped a young man about her own age. If a man he could be called, for indeed he was so wild looking, and rather short, and completely strange.

Nappy thought to himself that he should reassure her. That he should say something. He thought hard but to his astonishment, she spoke first, “Do not be afraid. I won’t call for help.”

Then he realized that he had been afraid but now he was not.

“Aren’t you afraid of me?” he asked.

“No: surprised, confused, but not afraid. I told you that I know you and what you look like can’t change that.”

“But I’m a Halfbreed,” he said gruffly, defensively.

That hateful word coming from that very real face before her was completely incongruous, even for her imagination (let alone reality) and she simply smiled, “Would you like some tea?”

He wanted to run away, but he wanted very much to stay. What was tea? Whatever it was, he would find out. “Yes,” he said, and followed her into the house.

Tea was apparently dark water that tasted like sweet grass. It was hot – but good. “Halfbreeds are supposed to be vicious and man-eating, but I think you’re more afraid of humans than we are of you.”

“Just you,” said Nappy; “You’re not afraid because you knew who I was before you saw me.”

She smiled at him, “That’s probably true. Yes, you’re right. How old are you?”

“I don’t know. You’re age, maybe?”

“How did you know so much about me? You’ve been watching me, haven’t you? Ever since Charles died.”

“I was watching the village, and then I saw you and Charles before you were married. I was int’rested, so I watched you sometimes. Then you were so sad after Charles died, and I wanted you to not be sad. I liked him.”

“You liked Charles?”

“He loved you.”

Her eyes were very blue: he’d never been close enough to notice before, and her skin pale and white, unlike the Halfbreeds’ half-baked tan. “I loved him,” she answered.

They talked a long time that day. Marityme wanted to know much about the Halfbreeds, but Nappy was reticent to tell. Bobakin did not know about this meeting, and he certainly would not have approved of a human from the village knowing details about Halfbreed life. He made her promise to tell no one else about him, and she agreed: on the condition that he return, and they continue their friendship.

And their friendship continued. It was an odd relationship, woven in and out of the two worlds so wholly separate from one another. They were the common link, the bridge between peoples, the relatedness that was impossible between such estranged cultures. She was entirely good, he was half so. But he was beginning to accept that such differentiations were false, misleading, and maybe even dangerous: they were the fabricated divisions that prevented any common understanding between their peoples. It was a division that was beginning to seriously upset him.

One day, he was thinking about it when Marityme actually mentioned it. They were sitting together in the woods behind the village, on a fallen tree trunk, listening vigilantly for any sounds of traffic, but still engaged in active conversation.

“I hate that my people hate yours,” she said suddenly, after a completely unrelated discussion. “I hate that we have to be secret about this. You’re my best friend, Nappy, and I wish I could let you meet my family. But they’d hate you.”

“I hate it too. I never really did before; it was just the way of the world – to fear humans – and I accepted it. But now, I wish the world was different.”

“Is that part of growing up?” she asked him, with tears in her eyes, “To finally see the world, and then to wish we never really saw it?”

“Maybe it’s part of growing up to see the world as it is, and wish to change it.”

“Change it?”

“Don’t you want to?”

She smiled, and shrugged. Then she shivered, and in concern he put his arm around her. She smiled again, “I don’t know why I did that.” But he did not take his arm away, and she laid her head on his shoulder.

After a long silence, Nappy spoke with conviction, “I want to change it.”

Their friendship had lasted months now. All in all, adding up from the time that Nappy first began observing her, he had known her for two years, one and a quarter being in direct contact with her. When he walked with her back to the edge of the village, Marityme grabbed his arm before they separated.

“I want to know you better. I want to know everything about you.”

“You know you know me better than anyone else. I tell you things I don’t even tell Denmin.”

“Denmin,” she sighed sadly, “I don’t even know who that is.”

Nappy shook his head in frustration: once again – as he had been many times the past few months – torn between his allegiance to his people and his friendship with her. “What more do you want?”

She looked up into his eyes. He stood a head taller than her, for she was a short woman and he a tall, gangly fellow, but she met his owlish gaze with her own firm resolve. “Is it enough for *you*?”

He swallowed hard, and scrunched up his face in frustration. His heart swelled up, and he did not look at her. “No.” After a brief silence, “But I *can’t* betray Bobakin! I won’t. Not even to you.”

She nodded her head, looking down at the leaves at her feet. Nappy felt like he had betrayed her by saying so, and his guilt was tearing him up inside. And she knew it.

“I want to meet him,” she said suddenly, looking up at him. “I want to meet Bobakin.”

Nappy’s stomach felt sick, and he opened his mouth to protest, but with one swift, fluid motion, she kissed him instead.

“I didn’t plan on that. I didn’t actually think I was ready. But I am, and I want to meet Bobakin. He’s the only one who can help up heal this breach. I know that he’s your leader, and you respect him. You respect him a lot. I would never wish to come between that; I think it’s wonderful that you can have a leader who inspires so much confidence, and I wish I had that. I think I would be willing to follow him too, if I could follow you first.”

Nappy felt crushed and apprehensive: he did not want to tell Bobakin, because he thought his leader would feel betrayed. But he did want to further his relationship

with Marityme, and he was clear-sighted enough to perceive that telling Bobakin was the only means to do so. She wanted to follow him. To be with him. He stood taller at that thought, and smiled like a little boy. He looked at her, watching her with round, loving eyes; waiting to hear what he had to say. She had bared her heart to him, and stood waiting for him to answer her. Tears welled in his eyes as he stood there, and tenderly he touched her face.

“I want him to meet you. I want him to know you. Together, I think we can change the world.”

Bobakin was upset because nothing was going right at camp. Dalimi and the older girls were frustrated with the little children, the little children were angry at the big girls, and Fofu and Schile (twin girls) refused to even speak to one another. There were too many girls who wanted him to solve their problems, and he had too little understanding of their problems to fix anything, so it was with relief that he saw Nappy approaching him. He wanted male company.

“I’ve got to cut wood!” Bobakin called out to him, “you want to come?”

Nappy nodded smilelessly. “Yeah.”

They worked in silence an hour or more, and only when the sun was disappearing behind the trees did Nappy broach his topic.

“Bobakin.”

“Yeah,” Bobakin raised his ax and dropped it with a decisive *chlink*.

“Morgan introduced us to a lot of different ways to view the world.”

“Mmhm,” Bobakin grunted, hefting the severed log and dropping it onto the growing pile.

“I think we learned that humans and Halfbreeds aren’t really so different from each other.”

“I suppose so.”

“That, maybe, we could be friends with them.”

Bobakin looked over at Nappy, “We could what?”

Nappy just looked back and firmly held his gaze.

Bobakin’s jaw clenched, “No. We can’t. Have you...?”

“They’re not so different from us.”

“They hate us! It’s dangerous, and you knew how I felt about it!”

“I didn’t mean for it to happen –“

“What have you told them? Have you completely given us up!?”

Nappy stood up straight and his face went red with anger, “I told her *nothing*. Have you so little faith in me?”

Their responses were sharp and quick, cutting each other off after every phrase.

“I had every faith in you! But you-“

“I never let you down!”

“Never-!?”

“I have been faithful to you every moment!”

“*How can I know that!?*”

“Because I tell you.”

They were standing face to face, eye to eye, fists clenched, and shoulders tensed. Bobakin looked Nappy deep in the eye, and sought out the hidden recesses of his truthful being. "Ok," he said finally, though still through unrelaxed teeth, "I believe you."

Then he stood back and fell to the ground, "Tell me all about it."

Nappy began at the beginning and told it as it had happened. It was better than Bobakin had thought, but it wasn't great.

"It's only Marityme, Bobakin. And she knows nothing." Nappy said when he had finished.

"Only –" Bobakin repeated, and then took a deep breath and held his tongue. After a moment, he answered Nappy's long narrative, "I must meet her then. And then I will decide what to do."

Nappy wanted to smile, but then he was afraid again. Meeting her was one thing, approving of her was very different.

Chapter 8 – And Then it All Changed

The next morning, Bobakin left his house to find Dalimi at the central fire in the village. She was making breakfast, and looking very pretty with her red curls pulled back and her face flushed with the heat of the fire.

“What’s wrong?” she asked him, taking one look at his face.

“Why should something be wrong?”

“Because that’s the only reason you talk to me nowadays. I can’t seem to get your attention otherwise.”

She sounded cranky, “Oh. Well,” he said defensively, “a lot of things have been going wrong lately.”

Her voice was bitter and spiteful, “I don’t understand why you don’t just talk to Jenjen. She’s older than me and not a child anymore.”

“You’re not a child either,” he answered sullenly, confused by her tone, “and I don’t want to talk to Jenjen.” He reached for a baked apple, and she slapped his hand.

“So, what’s wrong?” she asked antagonistically.

“I don’t want to talk about it if you’re gonna be so mean.”

“Talk!”

“Nappy’s bringing a human to meet me.”

She paused with her arms plunged in cold water, her sleeves pulled up past her plump elbows, and her eyes wide in astonishment. “Why?!”

“He’s friends with her.”

Her eyes grew even wider, “It’s a her? That’s not good.”

“What do you mean?”

Dalimi pulled her arms out of the tub, the floating vegetables bobbing and dancing as the water settled, and dried her hands. “He loves her,” she answered quietly.

Bobakin was surprised, “How do you know?”

She shrugged and stirred the baked apples, “That’s probably how it is. Bobakin, this can be really bad: love doesn’t always bring happiness.”

He nodded thoughtfully, “Ok. Yeah,” he stood up, and in penitence, Dalimi gave him an apple. He turned to go, but then, as if as an afterthought, he turned back, “Even when it’s miserable, love can sometimes be worth it.” He’d never thought of that before, but as he said it, he knew it was true, and it gave him healing.

As he turned and went away, Damili watched him with starry, tear-filled eyes.

Nappy was waiting for Bobakin on the edge of the Halfbreed village, and together they went the round-a-bout way to the human village, silent and flitting in the shadows of the forest as only wild, uncivilized creatures can move. Just before the village was in sight, Bobakin asked Nappy if he loved this girl.

“That’s not the important thing right now,” said Nappy.

“I’ll say what’s important!” commanded Bobakin.

“Yes. I’m in love with her. And I hope that when you meet her, you’ll understand why. Remember that Morgan was different.”

And there she was, standing in the light of the filtering sun that shone down through the branches of the fig tree. *She is more beautiful than ever*, thought Nappy, *he cannot say no*.

Marityme stood quietly, deferentially; waiting for Nappy to introduce her.

“Bobakin, this is Marityme. She is my friend....She is my love.”

She looked quickly at him: not in surprise, but with intense pleasure, and blushed deeply.

Bobakin bowed. He wasn’t sure if that was proper – he didn’t know what was proper for humans. But then she curtsied back and he felt better. “I have a great respect for you, sir. Nappy’s allegiance to you is inspiring.”

“As it is to you. We have something in common.”

“I have learned more in the limited conversations I’ve had with Nappy than in my whole life. He sees the world so differently than humanity does, and though he never told me any details, I have a great love for your way of life.”

“I’m surprised you know enough about it to love it.”

“I know Nappy. That’s enough. But I do so want to know more.”

His eyes narrowed; there was something very genuine in this girl, very open. And he knew if he let himself, he could like her. He could like her a lot; for she had a contagious charm. But he refused to drop his guard because he knew he had to be wary. It was his responsibility. “Why?” he asked her. “Why would you want to know my people? Why learn of us? How can that benefit you? You have everything you need here.”

“When my husband died, I was told that that was the way of life. That soon, I would remarry and have another family. I didn’t want that.

“I looked around my village and all I saw was stagnant and proper, nice and even-tempered. Fear and superstition reigned beneath the surface, but no one acknowledged it. Pain was pushed aside and excused, forgotten, or remembered to the degree of insanity. It frightened and overwhelmed me. But Nappy’s letters filled me with hope. They were honest. They didn’t cover up love with proper words or measured feelings. They didn’t bewail my situation with tears and exaggerated feeling. I’m not explaining this very well. What I mean to say is: I found something in Nappy that was missing in my village. It’s not definable, and it was there before I loved him. But I didn’t imagine it. If the rest of you are like him, then you all have so much to offer this world, and I want to learn it. I want to benefit from it. And ultimately, I want to be with Nappy, which I cannot do without your blessing. I am in your hands. Make your judgment.” And then she knelt to him in submission, with her large blue eyes and blond hair in full view of his doubtful gaze. It seemed appropriate for her to kneel, although Bobakin did not want her to. He wished he was not the one who had to make this decision; the thought

ran through his head that he wished he could consult the wise-man, but then it was the wise-man who was awaiting his decision. Then Nappy knelt beside her, taking her pure white hand in his, and bowing his head before Bobakin.

Dalimi was picking grass. She'd handed off the breakfast clean-up to Liael and Bebbin because she was too busy stewing in her mind to be around other people. So she was picking grass to re-stuff mattresses, and was thinking hard about her and Bobakin's conversation. And mostly, as she often did, just about Bobakin himself.

Presently, she heard someone approaching and sighed in aggravation. She did not *want* to be with other people! It was Nappy.

His orange eyes beamed intently at her, and he took her wrist. "Come with me," he said and led her into the woods toward the human village. There was Bobakin up ahead and he was standing with the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. She was tall and graceful, with hair that burned like the sun and skin that was creamed to perfection. Dalimi suddenly felt very inferior to this divinity and yet ardently wished to impress and be her friend.

"Dalimi," said Nappy proudly, "meet Marityme."

Part III

LOVE AND HATE

Chapter 1 — Union

The Halfbreeds were uncertain how to receive Marityme. Some were fearful, some accepting, and some just curiously cautious. Dalimi took her by the hand back to the girls' tent, and showed her around, filled her in on their life, and gave her background on their people. She did this all at Bobakin's request, for Bobakin trusted that Dalimi would be the best one to initiate her. It was risky, but it was riskier not to, and he had finally decided to let himself like Marityme. And his like was strong: he was now committed to protecting her, as he had been for every Halfbreed that had ever been in his village.

When Dalimi was finished, she left Marityme in the tent and went to Bobakin where he was scraping a hide by the fire. "She seems very happy here," she told him.

"But will she stay happy? Will she miss her village?"

"Why would she?" her pretty round eyes crinkled in confusion.

“Because she wasn’t hated there. She belonged there. And she doesn’t belong here.”

“Will you send her back?”

Bobakin knew he never would, but he was curious what Dalimi thought about it, “Do you want me to?” She was always so cautious and suspicious, and never had liked Morgan.

But she shook her red curls, “No. No, I like her. And she makes Nappy very happy. Happier than maybe I’ve ever seen in my life.”

The thought passed through Bobakin’s head whether he might ever be that happy. He nodded at her with a little smile, because he too enjoyed seeing Nappy so joyful.

“And I don’t think anything bad will happen with her here.” Dalimi continued, “After all, she’s human. And humans are good -....right?”

Bobakin didn’t answer, but then out of the corner of his eye, he saw Marityme exit the tent and begin talking with some of the little Halfbreeds. “*She* is, at least. She is.”

The wedding took place the next day. Marityme had brought clothing and cloth and thread and knit shawls and hats and all sorts of other things the Halfbreeds had never seen. She proceeded to dress the girls in all sorts of fine, beautiful fabric – decorating them for the special occasion, and for the first time in their lives, the girls discovered what it was to feel beautiful. Dalimi especially, being the first friend she made amongst the girls, she accessorized and beautified. Marityme donned her in a

pale blue gown that swished when she walked, a dark blue veil that contrasted the red in her hair, and a bright yellow sash around her middle. There was so much clean, brilliant, and unshaggy flowiness about her that Dalimi felt like maybe she was queen of the clouds, and had difficulty breathing for fear she would wake up and find it a dream.

Dalimi also had prepared something for Marityme, and once the human girl was decked out in her pure white attire, Dalimi brought her two wreaths – one for her head, as a coronet, and one for a necklace. Wreaths of green and white and pink and yellow and purple flowers. Marityme accepted them with tears of gratitude and a warm embrace for ‘my new little sister,’ as she called Dalimi.

All the girls stood to one side, and the boys on the other side, of the village square, and Marityme walked down the center with solemn ceremony, as the boys beat on drums and the girls blew whistles on grasses. All eyes were on the lovely bride, the new member, the curiosity...

except Bobakin’s.

His gaze was riveted on Dalimi.

With trepidation he approached her afterward on tiptoe. “Dalimi?” he asked, almost afraid that it might not be her.

But she smiled quietly, and it was her smile. “It’s done now,” she said. “A human and a Halfbreed have married each other.”

Bobakin didn’t answer. He was distracted by the way her hair drifted across her forehead in wisps. It was soft – like her eyes.

“Now they will have one night,” Dalimi continued, confused by his silence, and worrying lest he was worrying. “before she tells her village. But everything will be alright. Don’t worry.”

“Dalimi,” he said suddenly, vehemently, “you’re *beautiful!*”

She flushed beat-red, stared at him in wide-eyed surprise a moment, and then turned around and pounded off into the woods.

When Bobakin finally recollected his senses enough to do something, he followed where she had gone. Once he entered the trees, he began finding evidence of her passage: here was a crown of flowers, here a yellow sash, here a blue veil. He collected them, and finally came upon her in the clearing.

She was cast upon the ground, her red hair spewed like a cataract of glistening fire, her dress a blue cloud of daintiness, and her shoulders heaving in hard sobs.

He knelt beside her, “I’m sorry,” he said; “I don’t know what I did wrong.”

“N-nothing. Nothing! It doesn’t matter. Not now. I mean it does. I don’t know. I don’t know why I’m crying!” and she cried even harder.

“Dalimi, I would never hurt you if I could help it. Sometimes, I get mad at you. Sometimes, I’m mad at others, and you put up with me. And sometimes you get mad at me. But I wouldn’t make you cry if I knew how not to.”

“I’ve cried over you many a night!”

His heart hurt like a snake pierced it and infested poison. “What have I done!?”

The pain in his voice made her look round at him, and lay her head in his lap, “It’s what you didn’t do,” she said, calmer now.

“What *didn’t* I do? I couldn’t help it if I didn’t know.”

“Yes, but I couldn’t make you see, unless you saw for yourself.”

Bobakin was so confused, he didn’t even know where to begin his questions, “I don’t understand.”

She said something very quietly. He leaned down, but couldn’t hear, “What did you say?”

“I love you.”

Now Bobakin wanted to cry. And laugh. And run away. And stay forever. With broken sentences, he conveyed those desires to her. That he had not known before but now he did. “I was so caught up with missing Bahia, and hurting, that I didn’t notice how much I cared for you.”

“You just figured I’d always be there,” she said.

Again, his heart hurt at the truth of her words, “Yes. I guess I did. But I didn’t think of it that way.” There was silence a moment. “Am I too late? Will you leave now?” he asked shakily. But he had to know.

She turned toward him impulsively and squeezed him tightly. “Of course not! No! I will always be here; you took me for granted, but you were right. I’m never leaving you.”

Marityme and Nappy were supremely happy for one day. They were in love, married, alone, and nothing else mattered. But the next morning, Marityme knew her mother would come to her house, as she did every Saturday, and would panic at her daughter’s absence. So Marityme kissed her husband good-bye, and promised to return that night, after she broke the news to her mother. Perhaps, looking at it as we can, it is

puzzling that they were not worried. That Nappy was not terrified to see her disappear into the trees. But the Halfbreeds were a simple, peaceful group, who tried so hard not to hate others, that they could not imagine the consequences of hatred unchecked and the destructive power of fear unfought.

When Nappy returned from his hunting trip, Marityme still had not returned. Then he did worry a little bit, and went to the human village, to see what kept her. The sun was just setting, and the human village was in an uproar. Groups of people stood about talking, yelling, pointing at an out of the way shed on the outskirts of the town: the same shed from which the children had once rescued Dalimi as a little girl. Nappy went to the shed, but it was guarded by two men with sabers; so he listened, filled now with deep dread.

Said one man to the other, "We've never had to lock up one of our own."

Said the other with deep anger and contempt, "None of our own has ever betrayed us and sold themselves to those *demons*."

"Will we kill her?" asked the other. He sounded as if he wanted to.

"We'll wait. And see what Carl Drax says when he arrives."

Chapter 2 – War

Nappy flew with the speed of the wind on his heels, barely touching the ground, flitting in and out of the trees like a gazelle. In record time he reached the Halfbreed camp and found Bobakin with Bebbin.

“They’re going to kill her,” he panted. “They’re going to kill Marityme. They’ve locked her up in the shed and won’t let her go.”

Bobakin’s face went white as he looked at the anguish and determination in Nappy’s eyes. For a moment, he could not even think. But Bebbin had no such problem. His chest filled with outrage, and he went into his tent, emerging with spear and bow and arrows. “We will free her, then.”

Then Bobakin stood tall. “Yes,” he agreed, “We will free her. But carefully.” He added, in a measured tone, “No one will die today.”

Soon, all the men in the Halfbreed village stood together, spears and weapons at the ready. Even some of the girls had come out to help, but Bobakin was anxious to keep the party small enough to get in and out without too much fighting, and sent them away. The only person he looked around in hopes of seeing was Denmin, but he could not be found.

He could not be found because he refused to fight on behalf of a human. Denmin has been one of the Halfbreeds inwardly opposed to Nappy's marriage; but his love for his friend, and his respect for Bobakin, kept him from voicing that disapproval aloud. But now, when he heard that this human was locked up by her own people and he was supposed to risk his life for her, his revulsion writhed inside him, and he ran far into the woods, waiting until the party disappeared in the direction of the human camp. As he sat there listening to the disappearing footfalls of his friends, there was a softer tread nearby, and he looked up to see his wife: a spear in her brown, work-hardened hand.

"I have never before been ashamed of you," said she, deigning to look upon him, crouched there beneath the bushes, "but today I wish you were not my husband."

He rose up angry and guilty. "She is not one of our own! She never will be. The humans recognize that better than we do!" his face was flushed and his hands clenched defensively.

"She is your friend's wife. And if I were in trouble, Nappy would be the first to risk his life for me. This is no different unless you make it so – by your betrayal." She flung the spear at his feet, and stalked away, leaving him shamed and with a choice.

The Halfbreeds were silently waiting in the woods as Bobakin, Bebbin, and Nappy crept into the village with stun poison, discreetly felling villagers who stood in their way until they reached the shed. Taking out the guards, Bobakin and Bebbin stood outside while Nappy opened the door and ran to Marityme. Sobbing blindly, she received him with a warm embrace.

“What happened?” he asked her urgently.

“I told my mother, and I have never seen her grow so angry. Her eyes became like ice, and she marched into the center of the village and began to ring the bell. When people gathered, she pointed to me as if I’d murdered my brother and cried out that I had married a ‘Demon of the Rosenchanz Barn’. Then they grabbed me, and threw me in here, and that is all I know. They kept threatening to kill me.” She was still crying, though she tried to stop herself, and Nappy soothed her.

Bobakin’s voice came to them through the dark doorway, “Nappy, come out! There’s something happening in the square.”

They crept close, hiding in the shadow of a building, and listened to the commotion. There was a great fire in the center of the village (the fire reserved for burning Halfbreeds), and there was a man silhouetted against it. When he heard the voice, Bobakin knew it was Carl Drax.

“She is not the enemy! She has been led astray. We must forgive her, with open arms, and accept her back into the fold. We must give her the chance to repent. But these creatures! These demons! They have festered too long on the outskirts of our lives, and now they have become malignant! They will turn fatal if we do not cut them off at the source. If we do not eradicate *every last one of them!*” He was greeted with

cheers of resolve and anger and excitement. "You were right to bring me back. Once, you were afraid. But NEVER AGAIN! We will wipe them from the face of this earth: this earth that is reserved for *us*. *WE* are the chosen creatures, the final pinnacle of creation. And any other creatures that claim equal intelligence are a ruse of the Evil One, and must be thrust back to the pit from whence they came!"

At that moment the Halfbreeds, who had been intent on the words spoken and lax in their watch, were set upon by men and dragged into the center of the village. They cried out and struggled but could not get free.

"HERE they are!" cried that ominous, hated voice of the Leader Drax. "Here are the demons themselves, lurking in the darkness like predators waiting for their prey. Now we will show them who are the true Children of God! Cast them into the pit! One by one!"

"No!" cried Nappy, and his voice rose powerful and strong, "too long you have lived in fear of us, and too long we have feared you! But we are *not* demons! I know that now. We are no better or worse than you. We try to be good, and sometimes aren't; but I see that such is true for the humans. If there is a God, a creator, then he created both of us. And we must *try* to live in harmony, or hatred will tear us apart. LOVE is the answer! Only love. Never hatred. And if we can accept that, then we can live in happiness. If you are anything like us at all, and we anything like you, then that is all you desire too. To live in harmony and happiness."

There was a brief silence of total shock. No human had ever heard such eloquence and appeal, or imagined it, from these creatures. They could not believe that the evil beasts they had imagined in their minds could possibly release wisdom.

Everything they had ever believed shattered in the dust, and they could not decide what to think now. Did they believe him? Their hatred was so pervasive, so all-encompassing, but this was the moment of redemption: the moment when they could tear away from the past and accept a different future. It was the moment when Nappy and Marityme's marriage might have Changed the World.

But now it is lost. Because humanity finds it easier to retain habitual patterns than to listen to hard sayings.

Carl Drax was not shaken. His voice rose above the silence and stamped it into the ground, crippled and unable to rise again. "Now you have heard the cleverness of the enemy. The honey that accompanies their lies. See how dangerous they are. How sweet their defilement can feel. Let us sever them from our thoughts, forget their words, and purge them from the earth!"

And with eyes that could have bled with pain, Bobakin saw Bebbin lifted up, and flung upon the pile of burning, consuming flame.

But then – a cry like all the imps of the earth released from a thousand year prison rent the air and descended upon the square. Pounding, yelling, slashing, glinting, and Halfbreeds were a tornado of death through the village; Denmin at the forefront, racing straight to Bobakin and Nappy. He killed their captors faster than they could think, and as soon as he was free, Bobakin leapt upon the pyre, rolling Bebbin off. He rolled in the ground, and it was wet (he would learn later with blood) and rolled Bebbin about until the fire was extinguished. Bebbin remained unresponsive.

When Bobakin looked up, it was over. The Halfbreeds did not chase the villagers after they fled the square, but regrouped and headed back to their own village. Though

there were a few injuries, none of the rescuing party was killed that day. Nappy and Bobakin carried Bebbin back between them. Marityme spent the next three nights treating Bebbin's burns, and had it not been for her, he would not have lived. As it was, he spent the rest of his life with one half of his face disfigured like wrinkled leather.

Chapter 3 – Morgan Returns

Morgan finally kept his promise and returned. It was six years since he left, and in his mind, they were still the same young people he remembered, so it was with surprise and concern that he saw the aged lines of creased worry on Bobakin's young face when he finally found their new village.

"It is good to see you, old friend," said Bobakin, embracing him warmly.

"And I you. I was worried when I could not find you all at the Barn."

"Much has changed since you have been here."

"As I see. For the better?" he asked, though he could see it was not so.

Bobakin nodded slightly, "A little. But mostly for the bad. We are at war now."

"War!? But you have always been peaceful! Who are you at war with?"

"The humans. It is a long story. Come and eat, and I will tell it to you. I have many times desired your advice."

While Morgan ate the stew that Dalimi brought him (and he noticed with pleasure that she no longer treated him suspiciously), he listened to Bobakin's tale. Bobakin told him of Nappy's marriage and of the night that followed. He told him how the various human villages had banded together and assaulted the Halfbreed camp, and four Halfbreeds had been killed. "Who?" asked Morgan. "Jenjen, Corch, Fimmi, and Grefn." "They were all so young," said the older man.

Bobakin nodded, "All except Jenjen had been children." Bobakin did not realize that to Morgan's middle-aged eyes, even she had been little. Bobakin proceeded to tell Morgan that some of the humans actually now lived with the Halfbreeds. "There were those from the village who did not believe in hate but wanted to accept us, as Nappy proposed, and we have accepted them."

Morgan observed that that was very brave of them, and Bobakin responded, "You think they may be spies?"

"Well, yes. But that is not all I mean. It is very brave to change the way you think and accept someone so different from you into your culture. That very act could do more toward winning this war than anything else. Unless, of course, they are all spies," he added.

"Yes. We have precautions set up against that, but of course we cannot ensure it. But like you said, it is a risk that is worthwhile."

"You have changed so much," said Morgan, observing to himself that even Bobakin's vocabulary had broadened and altered.

"The humans are a large part of that. They have taught me what it is to be an adult."

“Not always a good thing,” his friend responded wryly.

Bobakin understood and smiled, “Yes. I’ve lost something with everything that I’ve gained. But I hope one day to see that ‘something’ on the faces of my children.”

Dalimi came over and sat beside Bobakin, busying herself with weaving a basket. Bobakin did not send her away as he once would have but was obviously contented and more at peace with her by his side.

“You said when you left that the humans you were returning to might be willing and able to help us. Were they?” asked Bobakin.

Morgan nodded, “They’re very interested in you. At first they did not believe me that you existed, but they do now. In fact, I’ve brought some of them with me. Scientists and doctors and sociologists, and even a priest who was greatly interested.”

“Again using words that I do not understand,” Bobakin grinned.

“Sorry. They’re smart and can teach you much. If you will let them come, of course.”

There was so much less hesitation in Bobakin’s manner than there once had been, “They must first understand that they are entering a war zone, and I cannot guarantee their safety.”

“I will tell them.”

“And then yes, they may come.”

Marityme found the humans in the guest house, settling in. “Morgan?” she asked, and an older woman with chestnut hair pointed to the corner. As the young human girl approached the tall man in the corner, she studied him; Morgan was middle-aged and

handsome, with a full face and silver graying dark hair. It was difficult to tell anything about him from a first glance. "I'm Marityme," she said. "Bobakin sent me to bring you to the war tent."

Morgan followed her and was surprised at the chaotic order of the Halfbreed camp. The last time he had been there, the group had been wild, haphazard, and tumultuous, with not even an attempt at order. Now there was not an attempt but an actual order; and yet still there was a wild exterior. If he had not been used to the complete disorder from before, he might not have even noticed the current organization.

The war tent was in the center of the village, beside the fire pit. Inside, Morgan found Nappy, Denmin, Dalimi, and Bobakin, plus a number of Halfbreeds and humans he didn't know.

"Morgan," said Bobakin. "Let me introduce you to everyone. This is General Cornanam, Chief Tend, Chief Denmin who you know, and you know Wiseman Nappy. I'm Commander-in-Chief. And this is Renteran, Caulfeld, and Fierk. We're Halfbreeds and humans, and we're learning to work together."

Renteran, a young human, maybe early thirties, spoke up, "The humans are led by a mad man, Carl Drax. He preaches a religion that personifies Halfbreeds as demons incarnate, and has induced most humans to join him in extermination. Once, humans were content to hate Halfbreeds from a distance, but now they will not let them live in peace. They hunt them down, and we must fight with all we're worth to keep them safe and alive."

"You speak of both sections as distinct from yourself. Humans as 'them.' Halfbreeds as 'them'. Are you not human?"

“I am a minority. I am neither.”

Morgan opened his mouth to say more, but Bobakin cut him off, “There will be time for that. And I’m sure Morgan can clear it up for us. But now, we have a battle to plan.”

Morgan was not used to war. For the first time, he stood by and watched Bobakin and the Halfbreeds handle a reality above and beyond anything he knew how to handle. And yet, to his disconcertion, Bobakin seemed to expect advice from him. Morgan deferred any questions put to him to Bobakin, claiming ignorance of the situation. When the meeting was over, Bobakin dismissed everyone, but indicated for Morgan to remain.

“You didn’t say much,” observed the young man; but then he sighed, “I’m sorry. I think I expected too much.”

Morgan dropped into a chair, “I think you thought I would show up and fix everything. Or have an illuminating perspective. It’s not surprising. I understand. But it’s not going to happen that way this time, Bobakin. You’re your own man now; and you’re involved in a situation I can not possibly help. Not with my advice, anyway.”

Bobakin shook his head, “Strange. I really do have to make all the decisions now. When we gathered in the barn, all those years ago...Morgan...I never thought it would come to this. I don’t know what I thought – I guess I never thought at all. I just wanted to be safe: to be safe with my friends. I never thought I’d feel the way I do now.”

“How do you feel? Scared?”

“Yes. I was never this scared as a child. But that’s not it. I feel responsible, scared, dull, tired. Why do I feel that way?” For an instant, Bobakin was the innocent, questioning boy he had been when Morgan first met him.

“It’s because you’ve grown up. It’s as simple and as sorrowful as that. You see the world a different way: as a dangerous place. Then it was all fresh, exciting, and adventurous. It was fun. But now it’s just tiring: because the world hasn’t gotten any better. You feel like you’re swimming upstream. There’s no hope left.”

Morgan was slumped in the chair, his shoulders sagging, and his eyes looking deep into nothing. Bobakin was still standing, his hardy frame supple and muscular, his sinews flexing and ripe for action, his eyes steady and firm. He responded to the tired hopelessness in Morgan’s voice by feeling a surge of defiant fight, “There *is* hope,” he said definitively, “I’m not going to give up on that. I can’t. There’s too much at stake to not believe in victory and peace.”

Morgan chastised himself and smiled at Bobakin, “You’re right. I’m sorry. There’s always a new generation to inspire hope in the old ones. You’re not tired out yet! Good! I do believe you will win this war.”

Separating himself from the crowd of specialists Morgan brought with him to *Goodness*, Father Serence sought to accustom himself with the Halfbreed village, and took a stroll in and out amongst the huts. He watched the children running about and playing and enjoyed the great innocence he saw there. Despite the wartime, these children felt safe and secure, and he was glad to see that. One of them eyed him with large, wide blue eyes, and he smiled at her. He could tell that she was impressed by his long, regal black cassock and braided rosary belt. “Would you like to touch it?” he asked her, holding out the loose end of the rosary. With timid and eager fingers she grasped the cord and pulled hard, making Father Serence stumble and laugh. “Careful there!

You'll pull me to the ground." Suddenly, he felt that there was someone watching him with disapproval, and he looked up and around. There was a young man standing a distance off glaring with icy eyes, who quickly came over and picking up the child, walked away with her.

"That's Cornagan," came a voice from behind the priest. "You'll have to be careful around him." Father Serence turned to see a young woman with green hair and gentle brown eyes.

"He's dangerous?"

"Only to those he doesn't trust. And you look an awful lot untrustworthy."

Father Serence had to smile, "Do I? I've never been told that before. Is it my beard?"

"It's your clothing. You're dressed like a preacher."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Lots you don't know. Preacher's usually think they know everything."

Father Serence did not respond, but waited patiently for an explanation. Finally, the young girl must have decided that despite his dress she liked him, so she said, "The man who leads the army against us is a preacher. He says we are demons out of hell, who need to be purged from the earth, to make way for the elect."

Father nodded slowly and sadly. He too had met such men in his lifetime. So much damage to souls could be done by one who claimed to possess heavenly truth. "I have only been here a few minutes, but I see nothing unduly evil here. Just people, and rather nice ones at that. You tell your Cornanam that I bear your people no ill will, but much friendship. On no account do I believe that you should be purged from the earth."

She smiled at him, "Good. I'm sure Bobakin would not let anyone here who thought so."

Suddenly, there was shouting from a distance, and three young warriors with rifles in their hands sped through the camp towards Bobakin's war tent. The smile disappeared on the girl's face, replaced by fear.

"What is it?" asked the priest.

"Battle. I must gather the children."

"May I help?"

She nodded, "Come."

Bobakin sounded the battle cry, and all those able to bear arms assembled in the main square. Bobakin stood before them tall, erect, and determined. "My people! My friends. Leader Drax has assembled and reconvened his army. He approaches the Deserted Village and will storm us here if he is able, but we will ambush him. We will barricade the village, and reinforce the barn. Bullbeast Group will go with Nappy, Manticore Group with Denmin, and Griffin Group with Cornaman. I will take the Vengeance Squad to barricade the Village. Bebbin and his men will stay here to guard the Children. Today is the day we show the humans what mettle we are made of! We may not hail from Hell, but we stand as their worst nightmare!! Let them attack: they attend none but their own funeral! Keep Courage, Be Good, and Fight for Honor!!" And with this last cry all the men and women clattered their guns, swords and spears against anything that would make a noise, and raised a din of fearful, chilling cries. It was bestial yet cadenced, deadly yet beautiful. Morgan felt his heart both respond with joy

and quiver with fear. And then they ran – ran with the speed of the wind on their tails to meet their mortal enemies. In another moment, the square was empty.

Morgan stood a long moment alone, staring after the departed horde. He jumped when someone touched his shoulder. “Ah. Father Serence.”

“On edge Morgan? That was quite a battle cry they raised.”

Morgan exhaled shakily, “I am so overwhelmed by it all. I guess I just thought time would stand still here. But these are not the Lost Boys and this is not Never land. I should have known better.”

“They are more and greater than anything you ever described. They are *real* Morgan. I never understood that until now, but I see it. I see just how painfully, beautifully *real* they are. And I think I even understand why this Carl Drax hates them so. It takes true courage to love them.”

“But you do: don’t you Father? You can’t help it.”

Father Serence smiled, “No. I can not help it.”

Bobakin knelt in the dirt behind an overturned cart, waiting for the approach of the human army. He knew his men, and he knew they would win. There was no doubt of that in his heart. At each battle, he knew who the victor would be: it was sometimes what they were fighting for that he doubted victory. Could they ever win freedom and respect by killing so many innocent humans? But that was not an answerable question, or a relevant one. What was relevant was whether they ought to fight, and the answer was yes: regardless of the overarching issue, the answer was yes. And could they win?

Most definitely. For they were more skilled, more free, and more wild by nature than any human they faced.

They were centered in the midst of the village where Carl Drax had nearly burned so many of them. When the war started, it was not long until this place became a war zone, and the humans who survived packed up and moved to other villages. Bobakin felt no sadness or nostalgia about this: it was long since this place had been his home, and he felt no love for it. In fact, it seemed fitting that the place where Carl Drax had burned and murdered so many innocents should now stand desecrated itself. They heard the march from a long way off, but there was a new sound this time. A deep rumbling that he felt in the trembling of the ground before he heard it in the tremors of the air. What was it? He knew not but dread crept into his heart. His soldiers readied themselves and their weapons. It was an odd mix of artillery and bows and arrows, but the mix worked well for them. All stood ready, and then Bobakin peered over the barricade at the humans. They were just within sight and in the center of their marching rolled a heavy, machine-type weapon with a narrow, rounded pipe mounted on a cart. They put something into one end, and then struck fire and covered their ears. Bobakin turned toward his troops and cried out, "Take cover!" but his cry was drowned out by a sound that left them all deaf for an impossibly long time.

Denmin saw the explosion from the barn, and, though he knew not what it meant, was filled with horror and rallied his men together. He left Nappy's squad in charge of the barn, and led his men round about the human village, toward the back of the approaching human army.

The men were overconfident in their new weapon and did not prepare for a rout from behind. They were scattered upon Denmin's arrival and most fled in all directions. Some remained to fight valiantly over the cannon, while others attempted to move it, and the Halfbreeds engaged them in close quarters. The humans were working desperately to reload the cannon, though they continually failed to lift the heavy ammo under the feral force of their enemy. Finally they relinquished their efforts, and starting up the farm truck used to haul it, they drove away, leaving the Halfbreeds calling after them with unearthly screams. Denmin ran to the fallen rubble now and looked for his fellows. He found bloody, dismembered bodies – cruelty to a dead body that not even he could have imagined inflicting, and he failed to comprehend that this massive death had been created by just one shot fired. There was Bobakin, lying a distance away, and a few others who were still alive, though none had escaped without injury. Denmin went to his leader with trembling fear, but found him intact and still breathing, and so they carried their leader and wounded back in somber march to *Goodness*.

Chapter 4 – Disquieting Unfamiliarity

Bobakin, when he awoke, asked to see Denmin. Dalimi was sitting beside him, where she had remained all night, and gently took his hand, “If you want, I will get him.”

He squeezed her hand and kept her there, “No. Can’t you send someone else?”

“Marityme will return shortly. I will send her and remain with you.” When Marityme came in, she brought bandages and Denmin with her.

“I was going to send for you,” said Bobakin.

“To talk about the weapon?” Denmin sat on the ground beside Dalimi at Bobakin’s head.

“How did you defeat it? Such awesome power?”

“We ambushed them. Engaged them in close quarters, and they had no chance to fire.”

“Carl Drax has finally produced a weapon of retribution.”

“How many times did it fire?” asked Denmin.

“Once.”

There was silence for a moment – a silence of disbelief.

“So much death,” he finally answered.

“For the first time since the beginning of this war, I am unsure,” said Bobakin, the wrinkles of his eyes deepening in worry, “Unsure whether we will win.”

Marityme and Dalimi had remained silent, as Marityme unwrapped the bandages on Bobakin’s legs, dressed them, and bound them up again. Now she sat back on her heels, and sighed. “If they have waited so long to bring this forth, is it not possible that they have only just finished making it? Perhaps it is the only one, and if you could gain possession of it, it would turn the tables in your favor.”

Denmin looked at Bobakin, “That’s true.”

Bobakin nodded, “We need information. We need to send a scout.”

He arranged with Denmin to send him and Bebbin on reconnaissance, and then Marityme told Dalimi not to concern herself with the evening meal, that she would see to it. So when the tent cleared, Dalimi and Bobakin were left alone.

Bobakin sighed.

“Are you in pain?” she asked, but he shook his head.

“Nothing I haven’t felt before; it’s not that.”

She knew better than to push him when he was reticent to speak, and so she just quietly went about the tent, tidying, sewing, and doing the little things a wife does.

He stared moodily at the hide of the wall and thought and strategized and forgot about happiness in his weighty concerns. Finally Dalimi finished her little tasks and sat beside him again, this time with some knitting in her hand. Something bright caught Bobakin's eye, and he looked over at what she was doing. Instead of her normal polished bone needles, she was using shiny and bright blue ones.

"What is that?" he asked, surprised out of his moodiness.

She smiled, "They're knitting needles. They're nicer and smoother than what I had before. One of Morgan's people brought it as a gift."

"What are you making?"

"A blanket." There was another silence, but it was pleasanter this time. Finally, Dalimi quietly broached something she had been keeping in her heart for some time, "Bobakin. I have something to tell you;" her cheek flushed with pleasure, and he saw it.

"What?"

But she did not answer right away. Then, all of a sudden, she began to cry. "I didn't want you to die, and I was so afraid..."

Bobakin was annoyed. He knew he should comfort her, but he was reticent to do so; he did not understand why she would bother him with her weeping. He had great matters to attend to and expected her to support him when he returned from them. Why must she always annoy him with her worries? He knew his thoughts and feelings were wrong, but he had no desire to overcome them and be compassionate.

"Well, is that all? Of course you were worried – I expected that. You worry every time I go to battle."

She was stung by the irritation in his voice, "I don't have to worry, you know. I don't have to be patient and wait for you and love you even when you don't love me! You ignore me and it's only if I'm in danger that you pay attention. If you're not going to accept and love me as I am, then you don't deserve anything I can give you!" and, petulantly, she flung down the knitting.

Stung into pettiness, he exclaimed, "YOU give *me*? And what is that? I hunt, I fight, I support and lead everyone! It is because of *me* that you even have a tent to live in." He was propped up now in anger, and she was standing above him.

"You *never* notice me!" she cried, and in response, he involuntarily attempted to rise, but cried out in pain and fell back. The bandage had slipped and he was bleeding again. Dalimi went over and silently reapplied the wrapping. They were both quiet.

"I just –" Dalimi took a deep breath, and began again, quietly and deliberately, "I just want you to love our child. The child that I carry."

"Wh-...Dalimi." Then he was silent.

She sat at his feet what felt like a long time, but was really less than a minute. Then he held out his arms, and she fell into them. He held and caressed her for all he was worth, bitten by the sting of the words he had flung at her. She was his own flesh, and when he wounded her he wounded himself.

"I'm so sorry! I always say the wrong thing.

"But Dalimi: I do love you. I love you! I could never imagine my life without you. And I will love our child and care for him. You do so much for me, and I'm sorry that I don't notice it. You are the anchor in my life that keeps me happy and makes me want to work hard.

“I want to stay this close to you forever and ever. If I lost you, I would chase after you to the Schump camp and past it, to the end of the world...”

She cut him off with a kiss, and they lay there together, holding each other and crying and happy and too emotional to move for a long time.

After about a half-hour, a call came from outside the tent, and Dalimi answered. It was Morgan.

“Do you want a doctor?” he asked.

“We don’t have a doctor,” said Dalimi.

“I brought one. Sorry, we haven’t had much time to talk. A doctor is one of the companions I brought with me. A few of them, actually.”

“I suppose it won’t do any harm to have them look at him,” conceded Dalimi, “but not tonight. Maybe tomorrow.”

Morgan bowed to her with chivalry, “I’m sorry. You’re the wife and I’m butting in. I’ll come back tomorrow.”

But she smiled and grabbed his arm as he turned to leave, “I don’t distrust you anymore, you know.”

He smiled back, “I know. I figured that out as soon as I saw you. I’m glad.” Then he winked at Bobakin, “Don’t let her go. She’s good for you.”

Dalimi followed Morgan out of the tent. “What other companions did you bring back?” she asked.

“A priest. A psychiatrist. A pediatrician. A surgeon. An anthropologist. And other titles that I don’t have any idea what they mean.”

She tossed her hair saucily, and grinned at him, "You always use such big words. Start at the beginning: what is the first thing you said?"

"A priest. There he is. Father Serence! Here he comes. Father, this is Dalimi: she is the chieftess of the tribe."

Father Serence bowed and Dalimi imitated him. "What is a chieftess?" she asked.

Morgan laughed, "I sort of made it up. It means you are the wife of the chief."

Father Serence cut in, "It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm sorry I didn't meet you earlier. Things seem to be rather hectic around here."

"Things are always hectic around here. What does a priest do?"

"We bring God in his Sacraments to people. We offer forgiveness for sins, a way to heaven, and a way of faithfulness here on earth."

"One day, when you have explained it, that will all make sense to me, I'm sure. But never mind; please make yourself at home. Morgan, is it possible anyone you brought knows how to read and write?"

"Well, yes. All of us."

"That's wonderful! Nappy will want to speak to you then. He's been trying to teach us, but it is hard when he himself knows so little. If you could start a school, we would appreciate it."

Then the little woman disappeared into the tent. Father Serence looked at Morgan, "They're such an odd group of individuals. Very patient. And very open to truth and knowledge." He sounded pleasantly surprised.

Morgan nodded, "Yes. Those are their chief characteristics. But also very stubborn and careful, wild and unpredictable. There is a primal element to them that, when it comes out, shocks one accustomed to their politeness. You heard that war cry. I have seen far worse, and far more baffling examples of their feral nature."

"Is it dangerous?" asked Father Serence.

"Their human," said Morgan. "Humanity is always dangerous. Are they good? That remains to be seen in each and every one of them."

Bebbin crawled on his belly through the long waving grasses, aware of Denmin's presence behind him, though even with his trained ears he could hear nothing. They both were a pair: if ever Denmin went on a mission, he brought Bebbin, and vice versa. There was an understanding between them of complete trust and mutual help, having saved each other's lives on more than one occasion. There was a large shed in the distance, surrounded by a splattering of tents. The shed was new looking: the wood still yellow, and there were loud sounds coming from it. Maybe of heavy machinery, though he could not be certain. It seemed clear that this was the barn where the cannon had been molded, and that they were making another one. He looked back at Denmin and saw that he thought the same thing.

Suddenly a Schump was visible in the center of the cluster of tents. Bebbin's heart nearly stopped beating, and then, instinctively, he shot out his hand and grabbed hold of Denmin's wrist. He was just in time. Denmin was like an angry dog held at bay, quivering and expectant, but still as a stone. Why was there a Schump roaming free and seemingly calm through the human camp?

There were shackles on his ankles; it took Bebbin a moment to notice. So he was their prisoner. But why? Who would want to keep a Schump alive and present? The older Halfbreeds were used to the idea of not understanding the motives of humans, but Bebbin had matured into a society composed of a motley of humans mixed with the Halfbreeds, and so their actions were not so mythical and mysterious to him. Thus it was agonizingly disorienting to him to be so confused at this turn of events. But he understood that Denmin was not confused: he was enraged. To him, humans' actions were forever inexplicable and yet one-dimensional: that they would have a monster in their midst could only mean one thing to him: danger to the Halfbreeds, and an insult to them. It wasn't rational: but there it was. That was how Denmin felt, and how he was reacting.

"We have to kill him."

Bebbin spoke calmly and determinedly, "No. We will do nothing. Our job is simply to gather information."

"We didn't know they had a Schump."

"And now we do. So we tell Bobakin. We'll do our job, Denmin. Come on." Slowly and silently, he retreated and Denmin followed, reluctant but compliant.

"We Have to KILL It!! Do you understand what I'm telling you!? They had a *demon*, a monster. Nothing good can come of that!"

His voice could be heard throughout the camp, screaming and angry, and challenging Bobakin to attack the human camp and kill the Schump. A crowd was rapidly gathering, and Bobakin, leaning on his wife's shoulder, could hardly stand as he faced Denmin. Bousia ran up and stood near her irate husband, confusion and anxiety on her round face.

"One Schump?" cried Bobakin at him, "You would risk the lives of all my men to kill one Schump? I thought you had changed, but you're that same impetuous boy you were years ago! You risked lives for a Schump death then, why should today be any different? You act on hate and fear, but this time you won't have a Bullbeast to save you."

"THEY are the cause of all our suffering: of everything that's gone wrong in our lives! Their death is what we live for!"

"Really! What you live for? Not your wife!? Not your unborn child? Maybe you should stop looking in other places for the cause of your unhappiness." Bobakin stumbled up to Denmin and gripped his shoulder. His brown eyes were right up against the orange ones of his friend, searching their enraged depths. He spoke quietly now, and only to his friend, so that the crowd surrounding them heard little of his words, "Once you lived to be *good*. To prove that we are more than that which spawned us. I refuse to live my life just to kill those who gave it to me. I'm going to *enjoy* what I have and give it everything I can. There are so many good things, so much love and friendship and goodness: why can't you let the past go and embrace *this*? Have I led you so astray?"

Denmin's surface rage had passed now, but the bitterness of his heart would not be assuaged. He looked honestly back at Bobakin with love: love of a friend and love of a follower. "I swore to follow your decisions so long as I lived in your camp. I made that choice freely, and I do not regret it. You have been the greatest friend of my life, and I will always love you. But I *cannot* stand by and wait for Schumps to come in the night and steal my wife from beside me. It haunts me, and I refuse to accept that existence. So, I will no longer live in your camp. I will live away from the tribe, and I will kill Schumps. Maybe they don't deserve it, maybe I am wrong: I don't care. It must be done, so I will do it."

Bobakin stood still a long moment but then he nodded. He was not surprised by Denmin's decision, just saddened: abandonment was an old wound, now freshly stabbed. Bousia came up and took Denmin's hand in her own: wWherever her husband went, she would follow. They walked away to their tent to gather their belongings. As Denmin turned away, he revealed Bebbin just behind, who had stood near and heard everything, and Bobakin saw the torture in his soul: the torture of being torn between fealty to his leader and love of his friend. "Go," said Bobakin, "and take care of him for me. Obey him in all that is right."

Chapter 5 – Beware the Stupidity of Men

The break was not complete. The love between Denmin and Bobakin did not allow for a total severance. They were two camps, a short distance apart, with two leaders. Now Halfbreeds and humans could choose which leader to follow and many followed Denmin: his crusade was attractive, and hatred is easier than peace. Denmin's group became the main fighting force, and slowly but surely, Bobakin's camp was the reserve group. The cultured, learned, and religious sect that devoted more time to learning how to read than to raiding human villages. Of course, if Denmin ever asked for aid, they granted it, and their peace was only possible because of Denmin. They all, both sects, knew this. Morgan found it an unlikely situation; one that, he predicted, would not last long. After all, would Denmin really continue to be happy supporting a culture that did not earn its own keep? And would Bobakin, who so obviously wanted peace, continue to assist Denmin in his warring parties? He gave it two months, but Father Serence shook his head.

“You think I'm wrong?” asked Morgan.

“If I’ve learned anything since being here, it is that these people do nothing predictably. Their mentality and thinking is foreign to ours.”

Two months passed, and Father Serence turned out to be correct. The situation continued as it had begun.

One morning, as Father Serence was just concluding his third group Baptism, Liael brought him the joyful tidings of Dalimi’s baby. He was a boy, big and chubby, and absolutely perfect. Had the handsome face of his father.

“Have they decided on a name?”

“Don’t know. I’m supposed to be bringing more warm water, but I couldn’t wait to tell you.” Her pretty face dimpled delightfully with unbounded happiness.

“Come now,” he said laughing, as he carefully placed little bottles of oil in his wooden carrying case, “haven’t you ever seen a baby before?”

“Lots and lots, and every one of them’s better than the last! You have to come and see him. I know they’ll want you there.”

“I’ll help you carry the water.”

The baby *was* beautiful. One of those rare instances where the child immediately looks like an angel: no red blotches, or scrunched up eyes, or sour expression. Even babies with those things are adorable, but babies without them just make the adorer’s heart hurt with love. Dalimi also looked well: tired, but well. Bobakin’s leg had healed completely by now, but he was absolutely useless to anyone. He just knelt next to his wife, unable to take his eyes off the bundle in her arms. Dalimi looked up and saw Father Serence standing above them.

“Father! You have come to bless our child.” She held him out, and Bobakin tenderly handed the baby to the priest.

“You will baptize him?” asked Dalimi.

“Soon. Yes. But for now, I will bless him.” He did so. “Have you chosen a name?”

Bobakin received his son back, and stood gazing into the infant’s wide open eyes, “I want a name that means something. That tells what we intend for his future.”

“I am sure you’ve named many children in your lifetime.”

Bobakin nodded without looking up, “Yes, but none of them were *mine*.”

Father Serence caught Dalimi’s gaze, which was glowing with pride at the joy on her husband’s face.

“What about Peter?” asked Dalimi, “after the story you told us, about building on a strong foundation? Peter means rock, and we must be the Wiseman who built his house on rock.”

“Peter Nappy,” said Bobakin, agreeing. “He will be strong and wise.”

Morgan had of course been in the tent, and he followed Father Serence out when he left. “I’ve never been much of a religious man, Father.”

Father Serence raised his eyebrows, “Indeed? Shocking!”

“I know that’s no surprise to you. Although I respect your beliefs, it’s no secret that I do not share them. But I’ve never said anything against them: your stories and rituals don’t do a whole lot of harm that I can see – no more than Dr. Abel’s shots and dietary suggestions: they can’t do any harm if the people don’t follow them. But now you’ve got them naming their children after it. Is that really wise? How much of your stories do you really think they understand? Bobakin is about truth, not fairy tales. But

you've started to pull the wool over his eyes by sucking Dalimi into your delusions and transcendences."

"Bobakin is an intelligent young man, and Dalimi is one of the sharpest women I know. I couldn't pull the wool over them if I tried. The extraordinary thing to me, Morgan, is that you can live your life in a civilized, peaceful world and deny the existence of a benign creator, while they have been harried and hunted since childhood, and yet still believe in a greater meaning to life. And I didn't instill that belief: they had it before I came. All I did was offer a name for goodness, and they understood it, applying it to what they already knew. Maybe you grew up surrounded by too many answers and that made you reject them all, and since they had none, they are willing to believe what makes sense."

"Sure! They'll believe anything that comes along: good thing you got in first before those Baptists."

"On the contrary. The humans believed in God, and had their own form of Christianity which the Halfbreeds rejected. It didn't make sense to them, so they refused to believe it. Mine was not the first philosophy to come along: it was the first that made sense."

Morgan nodded in disapproval, "You keep telling yourself that. But don't blame me when they drop your precious religion as soon as they realize it doesn't line up with reality."

He walked away at that, and Serence regretfully watched him go. Lack of belief always filled him with sadness since it was something so incurable. That was why he

liked living amongst the Halfbreeds: for all their quirks, they were over-brimming with belief.

The priest was only one of the many specialists that Morgan had brought that had remained, most having packed up early on and returned to the old world. The Halfbreeds had had many instances of wildness and oddity: episodes that made civilized people uncomfortable and eventually scared them off. The breaking point for most had been when Denmin's group had razed the human camp with the Schump and stolen the cannon. All was peaceful in the early morning hours of that day when a sudden scream, as of a dying child, ripped through Bobakin's camp. Every person sprang from his bed and out into the yard in fright, where Denmin and his men raced in and erected a pike in the center with the Schump's head upon it. Then they drove the truck that pulled the cannon, beating metal against the lead hide, and left it as a monument of triumph on the edge of camp. One boy (Serence learned later he was a full-blooded human) was dressed in the chains of the beast and rattling them like a monster from hell, while another boy (this one a half-breed) danced around him in rapid, mocking, exultant motions as the entire band whooped and yodeled and sang at the top of their lungs: not just noise either. It was a strong, frightening, stirring song that lifted you high and beckoned all the controlled passions in the human breast into free and unfettered expression. The final straw was when Bobakin's camp joined the frenzy, and Bobakin made no move to stop them. In fact, had he not been injured, there is nothing to suggest that he himself would not have plunged in. As it was, he called for food for the performers, and the entire day was spent in feasting and frolicking. Most of the humans could not accept such behavior and left the very next day.

But Father Serence had actually enjoyed that day. He was still a young man, no more than thirty-three. He was handsome and fair, with undisguised blue eyes that displayed frankly every emotion under the sun; his own heart had pounded in response to the wild song. He knew some of the actions of the Halfbreeds were wrong, as were many of their emotions. He knew that not all they did was proper, or appropriate, or based on altruistic, future-oriented happiness. But he accepted that what they did was human, because he recognized it in himself, and did not shrink from acknowledging it in his own heart. Secretly, he believed that was actually why these people believed his teachings: because he neither glorified nor patronized them. He immersed himself into *their* way of seeing and living, and did not attempt to mold them to his preconceived notions of society. Never would he say such a thing to Morgan or Bobakin: both, he knew, would react badly to such a statement. But that was what he thought.

Now, only Morgan, Father Serence, and Dr. Abel remained. The war still continued, but since the Halfbreeds had effectively prevented the human's building any destructive weapons (for on kidnapping the cannon, they had razed the shed to the ground), it had become a mere series of skirmishes: encounters that might have dwindled into harmless hostility if it weren't for Denmin's war parties. It annoyed Morgan to no end that Bobakin gave Denmin aid whenever it was requested, and advised often against it, but Bobakin just shook his head at Morgan's opinions.

"Stubborn Solidarity pitted against Cautious Individualism" was one of Father Serence's favorite expressions in reference to Bobakin and Morgan. He had held many conversations with Dalimi about this.

“Does it concern you that he puts this entire village in danger every time he goes to rescue Denmin?” Father Serence had once asked her.

She smiled, “Does it concern *you* when your stomach gets sick? Denmin is Bobakin’s stomach, and if he didn’t recue that part of him, then he would die himself. Maybe not literally, but what life is worthwhile for a man who refuses to help another?”

“If he loses his life, what worth is it then?”

“And what of all those martyrs you tell us about in stories? What worth was their life? Death comes someday: we must make it count for something.”

Serence shook his head in admiration, “You’re too smart for me, Dalimi. I can’t hold to my individualism even if I wanted to. Your sense of honor is too overwhelming.”

“And what of yours? Don’t you believe in honor and courage, Father, and all the virtues? You teach them after all.” She was teasing him, but also genuinely curious.

“I am but a product of my contradictory culture: one group taught me nobleness and morality in the abstract, while the other taught me to see it as futile and impractical.”

“Impractical? You mean the practice was useless? Then why believe in virtue in the first place? If it can’t be practiced, then why try?”

“Why indeed? I do not come from a rational society, my dear. Why do you think I stay with you? I find it mightily refreshing.”

She laughed in response, “Sometimes, you make me very grateful to live as we do. I couldn’t imagine a society that refused to believe in goodness and where every man looked out for only himself. It sounds very uncomfortable.”

“There are those back there who would say the same about you. There they have wealth, comfort, advanced medicine, and every luxury.”

“But what good are those things without goodness and taking care of each other? What can they do with all that ‘luxury’ if they keep it to themselves?”

Father shrugged in defeat, “Nothing. Nothing of value.”

The morning of Peter Nappy’s baptism the whole village turned out for the ceremony. Nappy and Marityme were the godparents and stood proudly by Dalimi and Bobakin as Father Serence poured the blessed water in a cross over the infant’s forehead. Suddenly, the reverent silence was shattered by loud calling and running feet. Bebbin, like an arrow from the bow, appeared in the village square. He went straight to Bobakin, and clutched his arm, nearly fainting from exhaustion. “Bring water!” cried Marityme, fanning him with her scarf. Bebbin tried desperately to speak, but his throat was too hoarse. One of the little boys brought a cup, and Bebbin drank quickly, “Denmin,” he gasped, “heh-he,”

“Calm down,” said Bobakin, “breathe. Then tell me.”

Bebbin took gulps of air, then said what he had come to say, “Denmin was captured. Yesterday.”

“By the Drax group?”

“By Schumps.”

Nappy’s eyes widened, “Schumps have never taken men before. What could they want with him?”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Bobakin; “we’ll mobilize both groups and rescue him tonight.”

“Half the men were killed when he was taken,” said Bebbin, “They slaughtered mercilessly, but completely ignored the women. It was unlike anything we’ve known of them so far.”

Bobakin was full of anger and determination, and opened his mouth to command a mobilization of the army when Nappy grabbed his arm. “Say nothing. Keep silent. Call a conclave, but do not command anything rash.” Bobakin looked at him in anger, but was calmed by the composed glance of the Wiseman. He nodded.

The conclave was composed of Bobakin, Nappy, Bebbin, Father Serence, and Morgan.

“Why did you bid me wait?” Bobakin asked Nappy. “You think we shouldn’t rescue Denmin?”

“I think no such thing. But we don’t understand what we’ve gotten ourselves into, and we need to know more before we rush recklessly into their arms. This has every appearance of a trap.”

“A trap! Schumps don’t set traps.”

“Schumps don’t raid a camp in order to kidnap a single man either. These Schumps are not behaving according to precedent. We can’t treat them as we’re used.”

“What then? How *do* we treat them!”

“We gather information.”

Bebbin nodded, “He’s right. I’ve never seen Schumps behave this way. I think they are controlled by the humans.”

“That’s possible?” asked Morgan.

Nappy answered, "They're just like any other animal, aren't they?"

"Are they?" asked Father Serence, "They can write, interact in a way with humans. We don't know the degree of mental capability they possess."

"You're saying they planned this on their own?" demanded Nappy.

"No," Father Serence admitted, "I agree that seems unlikely. But what if they are more the human's slaves than domesticated animals?"

"What does it matter?" broke in Bobakin, "They hold our friend regardless, and he may be dead by the time we decide what to do."

"What if we talk to the other side? Talk to the humans themselves, and see what they want," broke in Morgan suddenly.

Father Serence's eyes widened, "That could work. This Carl Drax who leads the humans: he must have a reason for wanting Denmin in particular. So we ask him."

"Ask!? We're at war: they'll shoot before we're in yelling distance."

"Not me." said Father Serence, "and not if I carry a white flag."

"You don't know that," said Nappy.

"I'm willing to risk it."

In the end Father Serence, Bebbin, and Nappy went as a peaceful delegation to confer with their enemies. Bebbin carried a tall white sheet on a pole that could be seen long before they themselves were in view. To the Halfbreeds' complete astonishment, the flag worked, and they were not molested as they approached. In fact, a group of three humans came out to meet *them*, also carrying a white flag.

Father Serence spoke, "Good afternoon. We came to speak to Leader Drax."

The tall man in the center spoke, "I am he."

But Nappy shook his head, "That isn't him," he said quietly.

Father Serence spoke again, "We came to speak to Leader Drax, and we will speak only with him."

The tall man scowled, "Very well," he said through gritted teeth; "Wait here."

They went back to their camp, and the Halfbreed delegation stood waiting on the neutral ground. After about ten minutes, the humans returned, this time with one more man.

"That's him," said Nappy, "older, yes: but him."

Leader Drax's eyes were cold and light blue, his hair, once brown, had gone gray, and his skin was palely white.

"You come as a delegation of Halfbreeds, yet you only bring one of them with you," he observed frostily. "A strange pride you take in your race."

Bebbin's chest swelled with indignation, but Father Serence laid a hand upon his shoulder. "We take great pride in not weighing each man according to appearance. You look at this man" he gestured to Nappy, "and see only a monster; you cannot see the worth beneath. While you look at this boy," he gestured to Bebbin, "and see nothing but a handsome, though scarred, face. You can not see the Halfbreed blood that proudly courses through his veins. We have come to speak about one of our own that you hold in custody. What purpose do you have for Denmin?"

"He is a slaughterer of men and a spawn of the devil. Need we another reason to do God's work?"

“You have trained Schumps to do your work for you. You will murder Halfbreeds, but you will surround yourself with Schumps?”

“Schumps do not claim to be human. They have begun to learn their place.”

“What do you want with Denmin?”

“Soon, Halfbreeds will know the power of God’s wrath. They will die as they deserve, groveling in the mud of the earth from which they sprung.”

Father Serence’s brows lowered, “Have you forgotten from whence man was made? Who made you judge of these children of God?”

“Children of God! Your understanding of these creatures is distorted beyond belief. They have seduced you into seeing them as innocent. Beware the wiles of the devil!”

“Beware the stupidity of men!” cried Father Serence, carried out of himself for a moment by the intense dynamism of a man so wholly evil. He would have spouted some more brilliant, accurate, and useless maxims if Nappy had not cut him off, seeing as he did that this conversation was not productive.

“We can continue to fight, generation after generation, and watch members of both sides die in agony, or we can come to some kind of understanding. Surely there is a humiliation that you wish of us in order for us to receive our friend back. Perhaps there is a distance you would tolerate between our two peoples? Spitting insults will get us no closer to our mutual goals.”

Carl Drax smiled at that. He was smiling because his stomach was rolling like a butter churn with bitterness at this Halfbreed’s undeniable intelligence. “You see this man?” he put his hand upon the tall man’s shoulder who stood beside him, “this is the

unfortunate father of a girl who left her own kind to unite in licentiousness with a demon spawned from hell. Everyday, he awakens thinking of her trapped amid their fiery eyes and weedy hair. Like something grown out of the elements that overtakes a pure white crystal and masks its beauty with putrid embrace.”

All the time he spoke, Nappy’s face had remained impassive though pale, while Bebbin’s half handsome, half scarred face grew red as a tomato with anger and indignation for his friends. Marityme’s father whirled on him and cast an accusatory finger, “It’s you!!!” he cried to Bebbin, “you who claimed my daughter for his own. I remember: you were burned that night. It was you who led her, with the false beauty of your appearance, out of the safety of her own home and into the filth of your company.”

Nappy sighed and smiled a little, “You want Marityme back in exchange for Denmin. Is that it?”

“Something might be worked out,” said Carl Drax.

“I will tell her. But you will know tomorrow that she will never consent to come back. Because she loves *me*. Yes me, who am more hideous to your eyes than scars or disfiguration could make a man. I did not lure her, but loved her as you never did, nor ever could. There is so much hatred weighing down your heart that you have cut her off yourself. Wait until tomorrow noon, and if she hates her life, I swear to you she will come back. But I promise you she won’t.”

The next day at noon, Marityme’s father stood waiting outside his village. He knew his daughter would come if allowed, but he also knew there was no way they would let her come. So it was with infinite surprise that he saw her approaching him

across the neutral ground. Then, to lessen the happiness that surged in his heart, he saw Halfbreeds following behind at several paces.

When Marityme got to her father, he reached his arm out to touch her, but she pulled back in disgust. "I'm not here to come back to you. I'm here so that you can hear from my own lips that I am happy; that I am not being coerced against my will."

He could barely speak through his anger, "You're saying this – You're saying this because *they*" he pointed to the Halfbreeds in the distance "are there. And they told you to say it."

She shook her head, "No. You know why they're there? Why I couldn't come alone? Because I don't trust you to let me leave. See that's the difference between you and my husband," (her father visibly cringed) "yes. My *husband*. He trusts me to leave and to want to come back to him. He doesn't lock me up because he loves me; and for all your talk, I can not bring myself to believe that you love me. So now I am leaving, and I am never coming back to you. Goodbye, father."

She turned and started walking away, and he called out to her, "Your demon friend will die! We will kill him if you do not stay."

She turned back slowly with tears in her eyes, "And that is exactly why I can never come back." And then she turned and ran away into Nappy's arms, who was waiting for her. Nappy looked over her head that pushed against his chest at her father, and saw the red flush of anger and the deadly irate gaze of his furious eyes. Nappy knew he had to kill the man before he was killed by him. And they had to get Denmin away free.

Chapter 6 – Why Are We Different?

Fr. Serence found Bobakin in his tent, fawning over his baby. The infant's skin was pink and soft velvet; his father's hide was scarred, reddened, and rough. Together, they formed a beautiful contrast.

"Have you seen Denmin lately?" asked Father.

Bobakin looked up at him in surprise, "Why do you ask? Is something wrong?" He knew that Father had just returned from the other camp.

Father shook his head, "Not that he told me. But something seemed off. Maybe he would talk to you if you asked."

Bobakin nodded thoughtfully, but then he shook his head, "I don't know that he would."

"You're his friend. He confides in you."

"It's been a long time since we've spoken apart from battle."

“And that is my fault, my friend,” came a new voice, and Bobakin looked up to see Denmin standing in the doorway. “Hello Bobakin.”

Bobakin went and embraced him with warmth. Father Serence took Baby Peter in his arms and went outside.

Bobakin gestured for Denmin to sit and then offered him a glass of sheep’s milk. “How are you?” he asked him.

“I’ve been alright.” He was sitting with the mug of milk clasped tight in his hands. His face was careworn and older than his twenty-some years, “Life isn’t as happy as it was when we were children, is it?” he asked suddenly.

“Isn’t that odd?” returned his former leader, “We’ve learned more, we have more help, and we’re more capable of protecting ourselves. And yet life is much more complicated. How does that happen?”

“I think the Schump in us gets stronger the older we get,” said Denmin. “Sometimes, I can’t fight it, and it scares me, but I have to kill them. I know that. I have to kill them but most of the time, I want to kill them. I wish I didn’t, but I do. How do you not?”

“Not what?”

“How do you not feel the driving anger – the uncontrollable hate against the evils that they have done to us? And then, how do you not think that it is right to kill them, to keep them from doing those things again? Why don’t you wipe them out?” His burning eyes bored deep into Bobakin’s, while his face contorted in passion, turning red and pale by turns.

Bobakin looked at him in compassion and leaned forward. His face, also, was older than his youth, but he had a deep wisdom etched into the scars and lines and leathered hide.

A wisdom only found in men of fifty or more. "How do I not kill the Schumps? I want to sometimes, of course. But then I just think about us, and I know that we are from both humans and Schump, and maybe everything is not as clearly evil and good as we once thought, but there is evil and good in humans, and there is evil and good in us, so I think, maybe there is evil and good in Schumps too. Maybe. I don't see it, no one does, but I see it in you – and that's enough of a chance. . . . So I choose not to kill them, even when I want to."

"You're so hopeful. You've always been hopeful. I'm the one who can't see the good in others."

"That's not true. It was your idea. You and Nappy. I remember the first time you told me about the good in us. You're the one who made us who we are today – who made us good, just by believing."

"I'm not that person anymore."

Bobakin put his hands on his friend's shoulders, "I still see it."

Then the flap of the tent was torn away and a Schump appeared, framed in the doorway. He sliced Denmin through the neck and pierced Bobakin's heart. As he stood there with his enemy's weapon in his chest, Bobakin knew that the entire camp was dead. The smile on the Schump's face told him everything.

Bobakin awoke suddenly and started up in bed with a cry.

"It's all right, my love," came Dalimi's warm voice in the darkness, "It was a dream."

He recovered himself heavily in gasps as she rubbed his warm sweating back, “Was it a memory again?” she asked after awhile.

“Some of it. I saw Denmin. As he was when he came to me a few weeks ago. But then we were all killed by Schumps. It’s how every dream ends – we all die, and the Schump is smiling at me because of it.” Bobakin fought back the panic of his nightmare.” He *knows* that he has killed my wife and son, and there is nothing I can do about it.”

“I know. I know,” she held him close. “We will save Denmin tomorrow. Just wait. He won’t be killed.”

“I want to kill them,” he said through gritted teeth.

Dalimi was filled with sadness at the violence of his passion, “The Schumps?”

“No. The humans. I hate them so much. Sometimes I can’t ignore it.”

“There’s so much hate in the world. How can we fight against all of it?” she asked, “It doesn’t seem possible.”

There was a whimper in the tent that turned into a wail.

“Don’t get up,” said Bobakin; “I’ll get him.”

As he lifted the precious bundle and delivered him to Dalimi, Bobakin took in the fresh child scent and the sweet, earthy aroma of his wife. He felt her skin against him as she put the infant to her breast, and with tenderness he stroked her soft, green hair.

“This is how,” he said. “With love. That is the best thing we can pass on to him.”

That morning was the day of the rescue and both camps turned out for it.

Bousia, too, came. She found Bobakin.

“We’re going to find him,” he told her; “we’re bringing him back.”

She nodded, “I know. I do. He loves you, you know. He told me that no matter what crazy, stupid thing he did, he always knew that you forgave him. He said he didn’t deserve you.”

To her surprise, he grinned at that, “For all his confidence, he always underestimates himself.”

Denmin was being held in the most strongly defensible camp of the humans, and the chief problem for planning a rescue was in the sheer numbers of their enemies. Nappy devised a strategy that would draw most humans out away from the camp and leave only a small number behind.

“But they know we’re coming after Denmin,” Bobakin had argued. “They’ll see through our strategy.”

“Not with my plan. We won’t be the ones that draw them out.”

Schumps tended not to raid Halfbreed camps since the time they were half-wiped out at their hands, but the humans were still involved in frequent skirmishes with them. The humans’ superstitions ran amuck when it came to those beasts, and their fear prevented them from acting rationally.

When most of the Halfbreeds, led by Bobakin, left in the direction of the human camp, Nappy led a small contingent into the woods, stealthy and swift.

Bobakin stationed his men at fifty foot intervals concealed in a perimeter around the camp. He did not know math, so he could not have said the distance exactly, but his setup was just as exact nonetheless. He waited crouching with Bebbin just beside him. Bebbin’s face was set and expectant, but patient and still. He was a young man now,

and despite his scarred face, still very handsome. He was more mature, more stable, and more observant by nature than most men twice his age.

When the commotion came, it came with overwhelming success. The Halfbreeds were running as fast as they could, with all the warriors of the Schump village in hot pursuit: they were all headed straight for the human camp. The humans were trained soldiers, so they did not run, but it was clear that was what they yearned to do. The generals called for orderly formations, and the soldiers hesitated to respond, until Carl Drax raced out of his tent and screamed at them to form contingents and prepare for battle. At his rally, they stood ready and tensed to engage. Suddenly, the Halfbreeds veered off from the camp and headed back out into the open. The Schumps blind with rage followed and went away from the human camp. This was too much for the human soldiers. Now that they were prepared for battle, they could not comprehend not killing, and so, in complete disregard for the shouted orders of their superiors, the majority of soldiers raced off after the retreating Schumps.

Bobakin seized that moment, and all groups of Halfbreeds converged from their stations and fell upon the camp. Full war raged on the open ground between Schumps and Humans, while the human camp was completely overrun by Halfbreeds. Carl Drax raised his gun and fired rapidshot at the invaders as they leapt toward him. Fierk went down, and Bobakin leapt over his body, and with one kick knocked away Drax's gun as he swung his long axe at his head. But the Leader parried and after a few more blows, disarmed Bobakin. The two fell to hand-to-hand combat, the young Halfbreed warrior against the seasoned human veteran. Bobakin's wild aspect, with his long green hair and fur pelts looked, at first glance, to be the more frightening of the two, but any close

observer, if he had the chance, would have noticed the look of pure hatred leaching from Carl Drax's clear blue eyes, and the terse, practiced movements of his disciplined arms beneath the smart uniform had something inhuman in them compared to the free, fierce, and lithe movements of Bobakin. An impartial, uncultivated person would have found Bobakin the more human of the two.

"There is not enough room in this world for your kind, Halfbreed," grunted Carl Drax.

"I know," answered Bobakin as he struggled in a deadlock, "we are the direct spawn of Satan. Or isn't that what you tell your followers?"

"We believe what we have to believe to live a normal life."

Bobakin slipped from the deadlock and flipped Carl Drax on his back, "That's wrong. We have to believe the *truth*, even if it's not normal." Carl Drax was back on his feet and going for his gun, but Bobakin grabbed him and kicked it away. "You lie to your people to get them to hate, but truth leads us to love. Why can't you let your people love?"

"Arrag!" Carl Drax punched and kicked as fast and as hard as he could, in quick succession, so that Bobakin could not dodge the blows. "You're a --- monster and --- no matter what --- the truth is --- that'll be the truth."

Bobakin fell to his knees, his face bathed in blood. Carl Drax prepared for his final blow, "Enjoy the flames of hell." As he swung forward, Bobakin held perfectly still, and then swerved at the final moment, and as Carl Drax fell forward from the momentum, Bobakin leapt up and kicked him down, and landed on his back. With a blow to the head, Bobakin left him unconscious.

Meanwhile, Bebbin had headed straight for the barn in the middle of camp. He killed the general who was guarding the door, but found it locked. The regular guard must have run off to the fight with the Schumps, because the general had no key. So he kicked down the lock and barreled through. It was a big room inside, full of steel and iron and wooden tools. There was tall scaffolding and metal rods, and rolls of barbed wire. In the very center stood an incomplete tank with a roughly mounted cannon.

He hurried through the building, searching behind every structure and calling Denmin's name. Some of the scaffolding led to a second floor balcony that wrapped around the walls, and Bebbin scurried up. After circling halfway around the building, he heard a moaning behind a steel screen, and rushed over. There was Denmin. Brutalized, tied down, and hardly conscious.

"Denmin," Bebbin fell to his knees before his friend. "Denmin it's me, Bebbin. I'm here."

Denmin weakly and confusedly raised his head, "B-Bebbin? How?"

"It doesn't matter. We're going to get you out of here. Just wait." He untied the cords, and as Denmin's body slipped down, he caught it and held him close. Denmin was shaking. "You're all right. It's all right. Why did they do this to you? Did they ask you questions?"

"No. No. They - they just hate us." His jaw clenched, "they hate us like we hate poison. Worse than we hate Schumps."

Bebbin felt warm tears slide down his cheeks, "What did we ever do to them?" He looked at the ugliness of Denmin's abused face, "How do we deserve this?"

After a few more minutes, Denmin's breathing was stronger, and he rose to his knees. Bebbin asked him if he could walk, and he responded that he could, "Come on then. I'll help you."

When they got outside, both battles were over. The field was strewn with bodies of both men and Schumps, and in the camp, a circle of generals and soldiers sat captive, guarded by Halfbreeds.

Nappy and his men had left the Schumps and Humans to fight it out among themselves, and had rejoined their people at the human camp. All the time, Nappy kept an eye out for Marityme's father, but he saw him nowhere.

Their return home was met with triumphant cheers and songs. Bousia ran out to meet them and embraced her husband with sobs of thanksgiving. That night, they held a great feast.

The next day, the influential individuals of both Halfbreed camps gathered to discuss the fate of their human hostages.

From Bobakin's camp there was himself, Nappy, and a young human who had lately risen to prominence named Davude. Father Serence and Morgan sat in as advisors, but had no say in the final decision. From Denmin's camp were Bebbin, Cornanam, and Denmin.

Bobakin began the meeting, "we are gathered here to discuss the just treatment of our hostages, among them being one of our most notable enemies, Carl Drax. A man who instigated the burning of our people beginning as far back as twenty years ago, and since leading an army and war bent on wiping us from the face of the planet. This is

what we have come to discuss. The meeting is now open.” He had talked long and thoroughly with Morgan about the best way to conduct such a meeting and what language to use.

Cornanam spoke next, “We have never kept hostages before. We have not enough men to guard them and still carry on a war. I still do not understand why we took these men instead of just cutting off their heads as we have always done.”

“This is a special case,” answered Bobakin, “we now have the man without whom the humans perhaps may not still continue the war. This may now be the end of our struggles and all the hatred.”

“The hatred is not just going to go away with the death of one man,” said Davude, “it goes far deeper than that.”

“I agree,” said Cornanam, “the humans may just appoint a new leader.”

“Marityme’s father, for instance,” said Nappy.

“Five years ago,” interjected Morgan, “you effectively diverted the humans away from you by feeding their superstitions. They’re afraid of you, and that’s why they hate you. Carl Drax fueled that hatred and started a war with it when you proved not so untouchable. Without him, the humans may be reduced to fear again. It is not an ideal deterrent, but it’s a start.”

“Regardless,” said Bobakin, “no matter how the humans will react to his death, he is still our greatest enemy and he is in our hands. We must decide how to kill him.”

“Must we kill him?” the question came from Denmin and everyone looked at him in surprise. His face still raw and red, his nose broken, and his lip puffed. “Maybe we shouldn’t,” he said quietly, as if with effort.

“Are you serious?” Cornanam was angry, “look at you! They treated you like a beast – worst than a beast. They deserve not only death, but a painful one at that.”

Denmin could not respond; it was clear that he was overwhelmed. Bebbin spoke for him, “If we act only out of retaliation, then we behave with hate.”

Bobakin understood, but he did not like what they were saying. He remained silent.

Bebbin continued, “we must decide what is *right*, not what feels good. Because then we act only out of emotion, which is what they do. Just because our hate is fueled by something else doesn’t make it right.”

“It is *justice* to kill him. Surely you all see that?” demanded Cornanam, “Denmin you know that. I don’t understand how you can be treated as you were, and not know the extent of their evil. It is justice to rid the world of it.”

“Isn’t that what they say of us?” asked Nappy, “that we are evil to be eradicated? Those are Carl Drax’s words.”

“What would be the point of keeping him alive?” Davude asked this with a calm, reasonable voice, “What, we guard him night and day for the next thirty years until he dies a natural death? It’d be a living hell – and not just for him.”

“What about banishment?” asked Father Serence.

Nappy answered him, “That happened once before and he came back. His evil will continue for the rest of his life, and he will pass it on to future generations. If we want our children to be safe, then we must keep him from spreading the hate. Maybe he isn’t a demon, but the hatred itself is, and we can not let him fuel it.”

Davude whirled on him, "Who's side are you on, anyway? One minute you compare us to the humans, the next you say he must be killed. What do you think is right?"

"I have advocated for both sides because I'm not sure there is a right answer. What do you do with an impossible choice?"

Davude shook his head, "Even if we hate, we must end his life. We can make it quick, as painless as possible, but the fact remains that we must do it. Cornanam is right; we must exact justice: for the sake of our children."

There was silence a long moment, and then Nappy agreed, "Yes. The consequences of not killing him are worse than the moral dilemma." All the others agreed, even Denmin and Bebbin. All looked to Bobakin, who had been silent and still for some time.

Bobakin finally looked up and spoke, "If any one of you thinks he can kill Carl Drax without feeling hatred, he may do so." He looked each one in the eye, and each one of them could not hold his gaze. "What makes us different from them? That is the question we must ask ourselves: now, and for the rest of our lives. For the sake of our children, we must not pass on a legacy of hatred."

Bobakin's opinion, his decree, was law for all there, and they finally agreed to banish Carl Drax. Not to a human camp, but to the woods, where he would fend for himself. Then they wrote up a charter and made multiple copies. They sent messengers to every human village within fifty miles, announcing the end of their leader, and the possible end of the war. They declared clemency to anyone who wished to stop the bloodshed. This was their legacy: mercy.

Chapter 7 – Justice

Marityme's father had travelled to a village north of the human cannon camp when the Halfbreeds attacked. He was standing with General Forker, a man who had won much renown for his bravery against Schumps and Halfbreeds, when a runner appeared in the village. It was a boy, maybe twelve years old, and definitely human so that his appearance did not immediately cause a stir. But then he pulled out a horn, blew on it, and began to read a letter that he pulled from his jacket.

“All humans are hereby notified that from this moment all bloodshed between humans and Halfbreeds will cease in favor of peace. Carl Drax has been captured and dealt with, and will no longer spread around his hate. Any humans that wish to live in peace with the Halfbreeds may do so, as long as they come to us and swear peace.”

The messenger was indeed human. His name was Rend, and he was the son of one of the couples who left the humans to join the Halfbreeds. All the messages were sent this way, so that the delivery was more or less neutral, and the peace maintained. Marityme's father approached the boy who was already being surrounded by villagers.

"The war is really over?" he overheard.

"How can we trust their promises? How do we know they'll keep their word?"

"You can't," said Marityme's father, "and you never will. They took our Leader, and now they think we will just bend to their wishes. They want to crush us under their heel, subjugate us to their will, but we see beyond them." He turned to the boy messenger, "We know what they want, and we won't give it to them. You tell them this war has only just begun."

"They're not lying. But they won't let you win either!" cried Rend, "They choose not to wipe you out, but if you fight, then they will."

"Let them try," he answered, "we'll be ready."

When Bobakin heard the response Rend brought back, he was standing with Denmin and Nappy.

Nappy shook his head, "This is never going to end. There will always be *someone* to carry on the hatred. How can any good happen in the world when there is so much hate?"

Denmin said nothing. His bruised face was set and stony. Bobakin and Nappy continued to speak, but he heard nothing. There was a roaring of wind in the trees, and it drowned all other sound, carrying with it feelings of desperation, justice, fear, and

suffocation. These poured into his heart as a waterfall into a pool, and he mixed them into the pain, self-confusion, and brotherly love of a Niceman that already drifted there. Everything boiled and promised and receded, and there was only one answer. It was terrible, it was not negotiable, and it must not be spoken. There must be a scapegoat, a martyr, a savior. And it must be done out of love. But he knew that was not how it would happen. He would do it out of hatred, and so he could not do it. And so the only answer was an impossible one.

That night, as he lay beside Bousia and felt her extended womb against his weary flesh, silent tears fell upon the pillow. Her quiet breathing instilled clarity into his roiling soul, and his heart broke, but it is the mark of a good man to hope in goodness, even when it is beyond his reach. So he rose in the darkness and left her there. He would never see her again; he would never see his unborn child.

Carl Drax was still in the back shed, guarded by two Halfbreeds. It was a simple matter to render them unconscious and open the door. Carl Drax was awake.

“So,” he said with a sneer, “you’ve come to kill me anyway.”

Denmin led him out of the camp and north, toward the human cannon camp. There, again, there were two Halfbreed watchmen, but Denmin knew where they were, and with a simple application of Helpa plant, they slept soundly without interruption. Denmin and Carl Drax walked for hours until the sun began to announce her advent by creeping her rays over the horizon: there was a faint, spring haze that glowed golden at her arrival. They walked through two deserted human camps until they finally reached life.

Denmin mounted a pile of stones and stood Carl Drax upon them. Then, with his head thrown back and his wild, uncut, long brown hair wet with the morning dew, he let forth a wild whoop at the top of his lungs. There were all the villagers, and they were running toward them. They stopped fifty yards away, with a gray-haired man at the forefront.

Denmin addressed them, "You refuse mercy. You would rather kill innocent children, women, and men to calm the hatred of your hearts. We have offered to let you be free, but you do not want freedom. You want death. And that is what you will receive." With a single, fluid swipe, Denmin sliced Carl Drax's throat, and the man who had instigated so much hatred in the world, in the name of goodness, expired.

"Who else wants to kill my people? Let his name be known and I swear, on the blood of this blade, that I will end his life. There is mercy in this world, and I entreat you to accept it. Yes, even I. But there is justice, and protection, and I will not leave my people defenseless anymore. And I can kill any of you that I choose, and you can not kill me. For my death will be at the hand of a Schump. Yes! I have seen my death, and it will come soon. But in the meanwhile, I will defend my people."

Then Marityme's father, with eyes that raged and a hand that thirsted for blood, raised his sword high in the air. "Is *this* what we allow now? We watch our own kind die without retaliation? We are Man! And we can defeat one Halfbreed."

Then all the villagers, the men and women and children, descended upon Denmin in one body and attacked him.

But he was mighty. He whirled and kicked and dodged and hit and when there was a large empty circle around him, Marityme's father, that seasoned, gray-haired

general, came forward, and they fell to battle. It was not long and was eagerly watched. Denmin killed him by piercing his stomach, and blood boiled up from his gut and poured down his hanging chin.

Then Denmin turned around and walked away. All the humans remained behind and watched him go.

Then Denmin remained silent around the village, and there were ghost stories and frightful tales that ran rampant there. Of two orange eyes that watched in the night, of a dark head of hair in the bushes, of sticks snapping in the garden. Any man who tried to instigate the people to war Denmin found, and the next morning, his body was seen hanging from a tree, or draped over the well, or lying across the main path. But that was not all he did. He killed any Schumps that came too near, he freed Schumps that the humans brought in for slaves and released them into the woods, and he protected any human that strayed too far into the trees. There was even a story of a young child who described a man with yellow eyes who “brought me back home when I was lost.”

He became a legend, an idea more than a person, who exacted justice and maintained peace at the cost of his own identity.

There were young boys who began to play “Arbiter” – as he was called. They would hide in the bushes and jump at each other, or would save girls from Schumps, or give wild whoops at the moon.

One day, three months after Denmin had left home and began patrolling the human village, Bebbin found him.

“How are things at home?” asked Denmin. It had been a long time since he’d spoken to anyone.

“Safe. The war is over.” They were silent a long while. There were no tears, no wild embraces. They both hurt too much and the other’s presence was enough of a balm for now. “She misses you.”

“Yes. I feel it.”

“Come home.”

Denmin picked up his bow and began to polish it. He looked it all over, and then held it over the fire to reapply its black protective covering. The wood of the Karn tree was like that: it needed patient hardening in the fire after so many uses to keep it fresh and smooth. It would last for years with such a coating, and nothing would rot it or stiffen it.

When Denmin had finished polishing, he handed it over to Bebbin. “Give this to my son. Tell him about me, please. The good and the bad. The Human and the Schump. Let him know where he has come from so he will know where to go. I did this all for him.”

Bebbin accepted the bow and then looked at his friend, “This will not last forever. And Bobakin will accept you back. You will come back.”

“No. It seems that way to you. But my time is near: I will not live past the new moon.”

“How can you say such a thing?”

“I have seen my death, Bebbin. I must just prove worthy of it. You will see. There is one thing left for me to do, and it is what I have been preparing for all this time.”

Bebbin did not speak a long while. When he did, it was about something else, “How do you know it will be a boy?”

“I don’t. But I hope so. I want Bousia to have a bit of me that I leave behind. Somehow, Bebbin, that is very important. Marry, my friend, and leave a piece of yourself behind. That is what we are meant to do.”

When the time of the new moon was just come, a human girl left the village and went to the edge of the wood. “Are you out there?” she called. “There is a story among my people of a Halfbreed who married a human. He fell in love watching her from a distance. I know that’s why you’re here. You’re in love with someone. Please say it is me. Oh please say so!”

But there was no one to hear her. Denmin had departed on his final mission.

The Schumps that Denmin had freed from slavery had returned to their home in the woods. He never saw them, but he could not forget them. The anger was not gone, but he had learned to rise above it: first with actions, and finally with feeling. So when he arrived at the Schump camp, despite the anger, there was no hatred that directed his actions. Just pure, unadulterated love. He approached slowly, and when they looked up to see him, he put all his weapons in a pile on the ground. They watched warily, but the freed Schumps grunted, and no one attacked him. He came even closer and looked them all in the eye. There were not all the same. Some even had blue eyes. They all had green hair, but it was different tints, and some tints were completely beautiful. Some had square faces, some round, some like a heart. One of them moved its leg

passively, and the motion was poignantly lovely – the bowed nature of the legs lent the movement a fluidity all its own. A beauty that no Halfbreed had ever learned to practice.

Denmin stood amongst them and stretched out his arms, “Hello,” he said calmly, quietly, “I am Denmin. And I am here to apologize. I am here to meet you.”

They looked at one another in puzzlement, and some seemed genuinely intrigued and even open to his presence. Then a large Schump exited a hut and saw Denmin standing there. With a roar, and to no one’s surprise or opposition, he felled the Halfbreed with one swing of his ax.

Chapter 8 – The Promise

It was four months since Denmin had disappeared in the night with Carl Drax. Liael, now a lovely young teenager with curling blond locks and brilliant sparkling orange eyes, was revelling in the joys of spring. Flowers grew in abundance on the edge of the forest, and she collected the blossoms, decking the whole camp with color and fragrance. She made a bed of blue flowers outside Dalimi's hut and laid Pater in it. He looked so precious thus decorated, and Dalimi said so. Liael beamed with pleasure. Bobakin noticed them and came over.

"What are you about?" he asked, with his smileless face. He had been sober since that night.

"I wanted to bring some happiness. It's been so long and there's no more war." She looked up at him with a sweetness that was soothing to his saddened soul.

He nodded slowly, "You're right. We have mourned long enough. We must have a celebration, because there is still life and love and our village." He lifted his head in decision, "In four days, we will have a feast."

"Four days?" asked Dalimi doubtfully.

"Too soon?"

"Not enough time to prepare everything. How about five?"

"Five, then."

As he walked away, the two women smiled joyfully at each other. It was more than time for a celebration.

Bebbin was returning from a hunt when he came upon Liael in the forest, weaving garlands of blossoms.

"Whatcha doin?" he asked. These two had grown up together and, although he exceeded her by some four years or so, they shared a close brother/sister bond, seldom acknowledged but often felt. She, in particular, had felt keenly his departure with Denmin to the other village and now basked in his presence amongst them again.

"Weaving flowers for the celebration."

"It's too far away still. They'll be dead when the day comes."

She grinned, and almost giggled, "I know."

"So you're wasting your time."

"No I'm not." There was a light of contented pleasure in her eyes. "Join me?" she asked him.

He shrugged, "Ok"

Bebbin dropped his weapon and the dead raccoon slung over his shoulder and sat beside her. But just as he settled and she handed him a lapful of blossoms, they heard a great sound in the trees and looking up, they witnessed a mighty beast that lumbered past at a great speed, destroying everything in its wake and disappearing again into the forest.

“What was that?” she breathed, but when she looked at Bebbin, his face was ash white.

“shsh,” he hushed her under his breath and silently rose to his hunting crouch and crawled after where it had gone.

Liael left her flowers behind and followed him. They tracked the great beast with no trouble at all, as it had left a wide, trampled path in its wake. Eventually they came upon a place that Bebbin knew was near a stream, and they stopped. They could hear it but not see it. With infinite care, they crept forward and peeked through the concealing foliage.

There, beside the running water and partaking of its refreshing coldness, was a great red/brown creature, with tusks of ivory, a mane of glory, and a body of a bull.

Bebbin felt Liael’s hand upon his arm: a silent question.

“It’s a Bullbeast,” he said quietly. “It’s a sign. I’ve only ever seen one other.”

“We can’t kill it,” she said.

“We could. But we won’t. Not ever.” They gazed upon it a long while, and admired the supple, free movement of its limbs; the glorious sheen of its fur as it reflected the sunlight filtering through the trees; the great peace and wild independence of its feral nature.

As the sun was disappearing over the horizon, Bebbin took Liael's hand and they headed back toward camp. When they reached the glade where the blossoms were lying on the ground, he turned to her.

"I just thought of something that must be part of our celebration. Will you help me?"

When they returned to camp that night they found it all in an uproar. Liael saw Dalimi run past her and she called out, "Oh, my dear! Get me hot water and rags and bring it to Bousia's tent."

Bousia was dying. She was convulsing, and as Bahia held her in her arms and Dalimi knelt over her, soothing and administering calming tea, they both knew that this was what death looked like. Dr. Abel came as soon as she heard, and bent over the pregnant woman.

Bobakin was outside pacing and Bebbin ran up to him, "What's happening?"

"I don't know. I don't know."

"Is there anything we can do?"

"I don't know!"

They stood there a very long time, and Bebbin was tormented that the wife of his friend, who had been entrusted to him, was going to go away from this world and take with her the legacy of Denmin.

But then he stopped as a realization struck him, and he went up to Bobakin, who was now sitting on the rock outside the tent with his head in his hands. The moon was overhead by now and they had heard nothing from within for at least an hour.

“She’s going to be alright,” said Bebbin to Bobakin. “It’s ok; she’s going to be alright.”

Bobakin looked at him in horror, and then just helpless confusion, “How can you say that?”

“I found a Bullbeast today, Liael and I. We saw him. She’s going to be ok.”

Before Bobakin could respond, the tent opened and Dr. Abel came out, “She’s come through. She is alive and resting, and the baby is born.”

Bobakin looked at Bebbin with wide eyes, and Bebbin simply nodded: the promise of the Bullbeast had been kept.

“But,” continued the doctor, “Bobakin, the baby will not live long. It is sickly and needs help. I can not save it here.”

“Where can you save it?”

“Where I come from there are specialists, and oxygen tanks, and all manner of help. There he would have a good and safe chance.”

“You can’t take him away from his mother!”

“Bobakin,” she said with emphasis, “she has consented to come with me. Tonight we will leave and we will take Bousia and her son with us.”

“But – no!” cried Bebbin. Impulsively, he went into the tent. In the pale candlelight, Bousia was wan and worn but happy with her child in her arms. Bebbin went up to her, ignoring Bahia’s attempts to send him away. He knelt quietly beside her and said with passion, “Denmin will come back. Let me go to him, tell him. Let him go with you!”

Bousia looked up at him with tears and love. He was her husband's best friend, and had always had a special place in her heart. Now, she shook her head at him, "No, Bebbin. Denmin has chosen his life, and I must take mine. If you do see him again, tell him I did this for our child. Tell him I will always love him."

Then she reached out and put the babe in his unsuspecting arms. He looked down, and thought that he never knew a person could be so tiny. He practically fit into the young man's hand.

"You are loved," whispered Bebbin to the babe. "Both of your parents sacrifice themselves now to save your precious little life. Take that with you, pass it on." He kissed the little head, "That is love." Then he gave Bousia Denmin's bow, and told her to tell her son, when he was old enough, what his father wanted him to hear.

The entire village gathered to watch Bousia leave. Morgan was going with them.

Bobakin asked how they would reach their world. "There are several vehicles," said Morgan, "placed strategically to return us. But the process, although not painstakingly long, is expensive and a little dangerous. I do not know that I will ever be able to return again."

Bousia would be carried by Morgan and Abel on a litter until they reached the first vehicle. It would take them the better part of the night, but once they got there, it would be only a matter of hours, and several vehicle changes, before they reached civilization.

Father Serence was not going. Morgan tried, the better part of the day, to convince him otherwise. "You may never see your kind again. You will be alone the rest of your life."

Serence smiled wearily. He was tired of trying to make Morgan see from his point of view, "You thrive on studying things as if under a microscope and then revealing your insights to an academic community. I don't. I am content to live amongst the oddities, not as a scientist removed from their world, but as a participant in the great and multivaried world of life. I have nothing, back home, more important than what I am called to do here. Here they need me. And if that need demands the rest of my life then so be it."

"Are you really so egalitarian?" demanded Morgan, and then he exclaimed in anger, "The self-righteousness of the moral man!"

Father Serence clenched his fist but said nothing. There was nothing to say to that, so there was a long silence. Finally, Morgan shook his head, "Who are you doing this for? Yourself, them, or God?"

"Why must it be so segregated for you?!" cried the Priest. "It is not one or the other for me. I choose all, and that choice does not deny anyone. Love is all inclusive. Everytime."

Now, Morgan looked at Father Serence standing among the Halfbreeds. Those creatures which fascinated him, and yet whom he feared, and for whom he had a great love: he understood Father Serence better than he would have liked to admit. He would never say so, but he had a lot of confused respect for the man. As he turned to go, he held those words in his heart and carried them away.

Bahia came alongside Father and as Morgan and Dr. Abel departed, carrying the litter, she began to sing and soon all the Halfbreeds lifted their voices,

Tomorrow is beginning

Today is joining
With all time – there is nothing left behind.

Come with me, my love
Follow me my dear
Into the heat of the sun's light clear.

And I will find you there
When beauty breathes fresh air
And halfblood face 'comes fair.

With this aching melody that floated above them and seemed to sing directly to the dark clouds above, the three travellers departed to their strange world.

They did not know it, but that morning was the day Denmin died.

Songs and dances, duck and mutton and carrots and potatoes, and berries and bread and sweet juices, abounded in the camp the day of the festival. The morning began with Fr. Serence celebrating Mass and all the Halfbreeds, even those still not baptized, knelt and sang with all the rest. Then they had breakfast, and the food overflowed so that there was more than they could eat. All wore wreaths and garlands: around their necks, in their hair, about their waists. Bobakin looked upon Dalimi and smiled, remembering the day of Nappy's wedding, when she had first looked so beautiful to him. She saw the smile and understood. And she, in turn, admired him. With

his tall, lithe limbs so supple and strong, and his dark tanned skin that glowed bronze in the sunlight.

They had games, and competitions, and prizes awarded for the best bows, the best spears, the best woven work, and the best needle-point.

That night, after supper and when the hard cider had passed around, Nappy and Bebbin built a mighty fire. It roared in the center of camp as a tribute to survival and life and glory.

But there was one last performance before the night was ended. Bebbin and Liael, before the assembly of all their kindred, appeared unrecognizable behind a mighty mask. It had ivory tusks, a great nostrilled nose, and a hideous grimace that filled one with fright and yet was oddly calming. With the assistance of one of the little Halfbreed boys, they reenacted Baby Bebbin's salvation at the hands of the Bullbeast: his fear and flight, his gentle touch of the frightful creature, and the beast's calm demeanor to the children. And when they were finished, Bebbin spoke to the crowd, telling them of the promise of the beast: to always keep them safe so long as they respect his might and always try to be good.

Father Serence listened and said nothing. Oddly enough, he saw no harm in this tale of respect and virtue. He let these people find their own meanings, and did not seek to efface them when he offered his. He trusted these odd and beautiful people to find and understand truth.

Epilogue

Dalimi liked to take her baby to the peach tree, and often spent many a morning with Peter there, letting him play while she sewed and worked. He would pick up the fuzzy fruits and rub them against his cheek with innocent delight. One day, when he was still very young and running every which way full of curiosity and innocence, he suddenly cried out to her in surprise to “Gook! Gook at dat!”

With eyes as wide as plums, he pointed with his fat baby finger into the woods, where she saw something that made her heart leap and her work fall from her hands.

There, in the shadows of the trees, was a female Schump. And with infinite, loving care, she was tenderly holding an infant in her arms. She made no sound.

Peter went on talking into the heavy silence, “Baby hungry. Pe’er feed baby.” And he toddled to the Schump, holding up a fuzzy fruit. “Baby eat beaches!” With a cautious movement, the Schump woman accepted the offering.

The two mothers stared at one another a long moment, and then, finally, the Schump turned away and went back into the forest.

The End