

COMING OF AGE IN THE 23RD CENTURY

BY
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“COMING OF AGE IN THE 23RD CENTURY”
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Chapter 1

The man stopped his truck on the overgrown logging trail and switched its fuel cell off. He glanced at the blindfolded girl sitting beside him. She was silent now and seemed calm, but he could feel her tension.

They had chatted and sang happily together while he drove along the highway in the early morning, beginning with nursery ditties and ending with a scat version of Beethoven’s Ninth, joyfully rendering its vocals in excruciatingly poor German.

But the girl had become quiet, and pensive when he turned from the paved road on to the forest track. He knew that when she felt the truck begin to sway over the rough ground, she realized that the first part of her journey was over.

He gazed at her for several long seconds while the many emotions he had repressed all during their drive surged into his thoughts. Then he took a deep breath and set his face in stone, almost. He climbed out of the cab and walked around the truck. He paused for another long moment before he opened the girl’s door and helped her to climb out.

When she stood before him, the man took her hand and led her into the forest, its cool dimness dappled with rays of bright morning sunlight filtering down through the colored foliage of fall. He guided her with care as they walked a hundred meters through the old growth trees and the girl accepted his lead with calm trust.

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The man halted her in the center of a small clearing and removed her blindfold. He waited while she blinked her eyes in the sudden light until she could return his gaze.

“Please remove your clothes,” he ordered.

The thirteen-year old girl kicked her moccasins off without hesitation, and stripped out of her shorts, top and underwear then stood at attention before the man. He looked down impassively at her, beautiful in her advancing puberty and her copper-colored skin glowing with health.

“You may ask one question.”

“I have no question, Sir,” she answered as she looked up at him.

The man could not keep a smile from twitching at the corner of his mouth at the girl’s reply. Then he saw her eyes gleam and he knew she had read his face, and realized that her first decision was correct. His pride in her almost overwhelmed him, but he showed no emotion, instead removed a sturdy leather belt from the fanny pack on his hip and offered it to her. He waited while the girl buckled it around her bare waist then he handed her a small knife sheath with a loop of leather thong sewn to it. She accepted it, and draped the thong around her neck so the sheath hung between her budding breasts.

He next offered her a small cloth bag closed with drawstrings. Marybell took it and he watched her feel its contents for a second, until he saw she recognized the shape of the pack of military field rations it contained.

She shook her head and silently offered it back to him.

He refused it with a smile. “Always have something in reserve. You can return to me if you don’t need it.”

She nodded solemnly at his words and tied its drawstrings to her belt, again without speaking.

The man reached in his pouch again and pulled out a coil of stout cord and a little knife. He held them out as he gazed down at the girl with a silent question in his eyes.

She accepted the cord and the knife, and held them as she returned his gaze for a moment, then she shook out the coil and swiftly measured it against her out-stretched arm. She used the knife which had a short blade that was quite dull, to hack three meters from its length. She slid the knife into the sheath on her chest and coiling the shorter piece of cord, tied it to her belt. She then knotted the cut end of the other piece and re-coiled it as well.

“I have all that I will need, Sir. You may keep the rest,” she said as she

offered the remaining cord back to the man,

He could not quite control his expression again, and the pride that flickered on her face showed him she had read his expression, again and knew her second decision was also correct.

The man gazed down into the girl's emerald green eyes for a moment, then when he felt he could safely speak in a normal voice he reached into his pouch a final time.

"We will expect you starting at noon three days from now. The first star that shines in the evening is your deadline. Now please close your eyes until I have gone."

She clamped her eyelids shut and he lifted her left wrist and looped something around it then hugged her to his chest with a fierce tenderness.

"Don't worry Marybell, all of your ancestors walk with you Baby Bird," he whispered.

"I know Daddy," she whispered back as she wrapped her arms around his neck and returned his hug with her eyes tight-closed.

"Thank you for everything - and I'll bring dinner."

The man kissed his daughter's forehead then released her. He gathered up her discarded clothing and left the clearing without another word while Marybell stood braced at attention in the bright morning light.

He, who could move like a wraith through the wilderness, crunched on fallen branches and noisily forced his way through the understory brush as he made his way back to the truck. He climbed in the cab - and pressed his forehead on the steering wheel for many moments while he thought with love and pride, and anguished worry about his daughter.

He knew she was strong and resourceful for her age, but he also could not ignore what he knew of the dangers she could find in the wild world where he had left her...

The man raised his head from the steering wheel after another moment then slammed the truck's door with unnecessary force. He switched on its fuel cell and drove back down the old logging road to the highway.

He increased his speed when reached the main road and began driving the thirty kilometers back to where his wife and the parents of the three other children undergoing the trial waited. As he drove, he occasionally hummed snatches of the Beethoven piece again - but now in a slower and much more somber tempo...

*

Chapter 2

Marybell stood at attention as she listened to the noises she knew her father made on purpose walking back to their truck.

She waited five more minutes by her pulse-count after she heard the slam of his door and the noise of the truck fade away then she relaxed and took a deep breath. She opened her eyes to the bright light in the still clearing, and lifted her wrist to look at what her father had looped around it.

She gasped when she saw the color of the length of ordinary yarn that signified his, and the tribe's assessment of her. It was the dull black of their highest honor – and of her greatest challenge.

Marybell slowly sank to sit cross-legged on the ground. She closed her eyes and willed herself to relax. She had learned to do this before trying an acrobatic leap in her school gym and she did this now, and emptied her mind. She concentrated on the sounds of the forest as they slowly return to normal after the noise she and her father made entering the clearing, and his leaving.

A slight breeze rustled in the leaves over her head several minutes later and a breath of air caressed her shoulders, and she suddenly had a feeling that she was welcome in this wild place - and at home.

Marybell opened her eyes with a happy sigh and began to look at the clearing around her, taking in everything she saw and trying to sense all aspects of where she sat. She noted a flicker of movement from the corner of her eye when a whiff of breeze sighed through the trees again, and looked toward a shrub at the edge of the clearing. She bounded to her feet after a moment.

“Show time,” Marybell muttered as she brushed away the leaves and twigs sticking to her bottom and strode the five meters to the bush, where her first black yarn marker fluttered from a branch.

She grasped the yarn, but then paused for a second and snapped the branch where the marker had hung. Then she stepped halfway back to the spot where she had first stood in the clearing, the place where her father had placed her when she was naked and blindfolded...

Marybell looped the new yarn around her wrist and stretched both arms straight out from her shoulders. She sighted over her right fist and upraised thumb at her starting place, then carefully held that sighting point and keeping her arms in a straight line, walked around in an arc until her left

outstretched arm and upraised thumb was aligned with the broken branch where her first marker yarn had fluttered in the breeze.

She knew intuitively that with her arms on these two points, she had found the line-of-march toward her first objective, as her father had intended.

Marybell raised her left arm above the bush and sighted along it to mark the direction of the route she would take. Satisfied, she dropped her arms and looked up to note the position of the morning sun, then walked out of the clearing and into the forest without a pause.

*

She made her way over the rough floor of the forest under its canopy of old-growth trees and down the slope before her, trying to move quickly while being careful of her bare feet at the same time. She hoped to find a stream in the valley below, but as she paced she also was alert for anything she could use to equip herself.

Marybell was halfway down the ridge when she spied a storm-downed tree that had crashed onto several saplings, and split one down its small trunk. She paused, then looked at it and realized that the sapling was dry and had no rot. The split section was also the right length for her height, and she could tell by its bark that it was ash, the wood her people used to make their bows.

She stepped carefully to the fallen tree but then remembered how dull her little knife was, so she dropped to her knees and began searching through the soil and loose stones in the pit where the big tree's roots had pulled out of the ground.

She examined then discarded several rocks, until she seized a small flat piece of fine-grained quartzite. She grinned as she spit on it, and began honing her short blade on this natural whetstone.

She ignored the time it took her to whittle off a section of the split sapling because she knew it was worth the delay. She also realized another of her father's subtiles while she was cutting the bow-stave free. The metal of her little knife was made of carbon steel rather than stainless, so she could re-sharpen it easily, and it took a better edge than the modern metal.

This encouraged her as she continued her whittling...

When Marybell finished trimming the split section, she sheathed her knife and stood, and started to tuck the sharpening stone in the pouch at her belt, then realized another of her father's subtle aids.

He had known that her pride would not let her use the emergency ration,

but he had also known she would need the bag containing it.

Marybell brushed away a sudden tear, then squaring her shoulders and grasping her newly cut stave, marched on down the slope as if a guard of honor led the way before her.

*

She used her arms and upraised thumbs to select new direction markers along her line-of-march as she made her way on down the slope through the forest and so kept on her course to the base of the ridge. She heard it at first then found that a little stream did indeed flow in the valley, trickling over a flat stone ledge before gurgling into a small pool.

Marybell stood for a moment at its bank. She breathed easily in the dim light of the forest before she waded into the water. The pool was shallow in the dry weather of the season, but the water was clear and cool so she squatted and drank deeply from her cupped hands.

She stood again and splashed up onto the ledge and gazed around once more, keeping her mind empty and letting her eyes direct themselves.

Until she sensed an anomaly on the other side of the stream, and after a moment focused on a sapling growing in the thin soil above the ledge.

She splashed across the stream with a happy grin and found her second marker wrapped around two of its little branches.

Marybell started to reach for the black yarn, but then paused. She peered at it as she remembered that her first marker had hung from only a single twig. She considered the way this yarn was placed, then squatted and sighted across the two places where it was looped over the twigs.

She noted the direction indicated by these points, then stepped back and holding out her arm, sighted over her up-thrust thumb again, on a line the way that the yarn was draped. She held that direction and raised her arm, and found that her new bearing angled sharply away from the line she had been following down the ridge before she had crossed the creek.

She looked again at how her father had placed the yarn to show the change in her course, then chose a tall hemlock in her new direction as a landmark.

“Sneaky, Bird Nose - real Snee-key!” she chuckled.

Marybell tied two knots in the new strand before looping it on her wrist with the other two, and climbed back down into the little pool below the ledge to drink deeply again. She picked up several egg-sized pebbles from the

sandy gravels on its bottom while she squatted in the water. Then she spotted, and grabbed another pebble on the bottom that was dark brown, lumpy and oddly heavy. She thought for a moment as she weighed it in her hand while gazing at the stream bank across the pool where the spring floods had laid the soil bare.

Her eyes suddenly gleamed and she grinned as she tucked all the stones in her pouch, and splashed over to the exposed earthen bank.

Marybell used a flat piece of rocky shale from the streambed to dig out a glob of sticky gray clay, which she then dipped in the pool. She hopped back up on the ledge, and kneaded the glob in her hand for a moment before grasping her bow-stave and clambering up the bank from the stream.

She paused on the level space at the base of the next ridge and looked back at the small sapling behind her. She held her arms straight out again and stepped around until they were aligned between it and the hemlock tree she had chosen to check her new course, then took a deep breath and began carefully pacing in that direction.

She had to pause almost at once however, because a dense clump of low-bending trees growing at the toe of the slope blocked her way. She was frowning at this barrier and looking for an easy path around it, when she remembered an afternoon back when she was ten.

She had spent a lot of time with her grandfather, walking in the woods on his many visits to the retrogressive Woodland Indian village where she lived with her parents. He always spent most of his time with her when he came, and gently taught her the traditions and crafts of her people, the Pamunkey.

Marybell shook off her reverie and grunted "Ha!" like a successful hunter. She gathered what she needed in several moments and bundled them to her stave with the cord from her belt. She started out again, kneading the ball of moist clay in her hand as she climbed up the ridge in the dim light under the tall trees.

*

Marybell walked as fast as she could while still stepping with care, and found that she could use her stave as a hiking stick on the steeper parts. She made good progress up the slope for an hour in this way, until she paused before an up-thrust rock ledge that blocked her path.

She stood and panted, while she looked at the high wall of gray stone and considered what to do. She sighed as she saw how far the outcrop

stretched both to her left and her right, and decided that going around it would cost her too much time.

Marybell grimaced then scrambled up its rough face at a spot that looked to be the easiest and paused when she reached the top of the ledge. She balanced there for several moments as she looked the equally rough slanting surface on the other side and looked for the best way down it.

She was still looking for footholds when she realized that this rock was different from the ledge back in the valley where she had crossed the stream. She recognized it from what she had learned in her academy, a thin-bedded limestone that had been folded and tilted when the mountains were pushed up eons ago, much like rumples in a gigantic bedspread.

Marybell looked at the rocks a moment longer, then gave a happy squeal when she saw that one of the beds had chert nodules in it, the hard gray flint her ancestors used to make their arrowheads and spear points...

She balanced herself and squatted before the rock stratum, then wrinkled her brow. She looked around, fretting that she needed to break some of the white-coated nodules free from the limestone when her eyes lit on a small stone lying near where she perched. She seized it and began hammering at the softer rock, then just as abruptly paused and looked at the stone in her hand. She recognized it after a moment as very hard black basalt, and she knew this stone was not natural in limestone rocks, and it was shaped to fit in her hand, perfectly...

She blinked her eyes, and then with calm certainty looked to the place where it had laid - and saw the neat little coil of black yarn her father had placed under it when he left the hammerstone for her to find.

Marybell shook her head in grim admiration as she turned back to her work and broke out three chert nodules. Then she used the hammerstone as her grandfather had taught her, to chip gray razor-edged spalls from two of the nodules. She stowed these in her pouch along with the third nodule and her new tool.

Marybell tied identifying knots in the end of this marker yarn as well and looped on her wrist before gingerly making her way down the far side of the up-thrust ledge. She used her staff for support again as she began climbing the forested ridge, still kneading the lump of moist clay.

*

Marybell awoke shivering in the chill of the predawn the next morning. She was huddled under the laurel bush where she had crawled when it became too dark for her to see her way the evening before. She had pushed herself hard and had traveled at a trot when the footing permitted for most of the day. She had found six more yarn markers and had come a great distance. She also had not stopped to rest or to eat and had only paused once, to drink quickly from a stream that crossed her path.

As the day wore on and she followed the new direction of each marker she found, Marybell had begun to intuitively feel when it was time to expect the next. Either the landforms, or the logic of wilderness travel spoke softly to her, and she sensed the call because she kept her mind open, and uncluttered.

By doing this, she had been able to catch her father's subtle clues and locate her yarns - until she had suddenly collapsed after dusk. Dizzy with fatigue, she had crawled to the closest shelter and had huddled under the scant protection of a laurel thicket throughout the night.

Marybell was curled like a naked baby, hugging herself in the morning chill and shivering. She whimpered in dark despair where she lay with her eyes closed, as well in pain from the scrapes and bruises covering her body. She felt cold and lonely and hungry, and was miserably sorry for herself.

Then she sniffled, and opened her eyes to look fuzzily at her left wrist that cradled her head. When her eyes focused, she saw the black color of the yarns looped on it - and suddenly the knowledge that quitting was not possible flooded through her. This knowledge also wakened a resolve in her, and a surge of strength that she had never felt before.

Marybell clinched her teeth and crawled out from under the thicket on her scratched hands and knees then got to her feet with a grunt of pain. She forced herself to ignore the aches and tiredness of her body as she gathered her things again, and whispered as she began striding on her way and looking for her next marker.

"Dammit woman! Quit whining and just do it!"

*

She had been climbing toward the crest of another ridge for several hours when a large doe burst out of a clump of understory brush near her and bounded off through the trees. Marybell was startled then she paused and thought, until she decided to go into the thicket.

She laid her bundled stave on the ground and licking a finger, held it

up to find the direction of the slight air movement. She took the hammerstone from her pouch and made her way silently to the down-wind side of the thicket, and crept in to it as quietly a drifting fog.

Marybell stood motionless while she searched with only her eyes - until she spotted what she had hoped to find but did not really expect. A late season dapple-coated fawn lay curled in frozen stillness on the ground before her, almost invisible in its nest of dried leaves.

She leaped without conscious thought and landed straddling the fawn's back before it could bolt. It struggled frantically as she grabbed the back of its neck and pushed its head to the ground with one hand, and stunned it with blows of the hammerstone on its head.

She dropped the stone when the fawn stopped struggling for a moment and snatched out her little knife. She pulled its head up to her chest and gritting her teeth, cut at its exposed throat until bright arterial blood spurted out onto her hand and the leaves of its bed.

Marybell watched its eyes glaze and felt its pulse cease under her legs, as she sat on it while tears trickled down her flushed cheeks. She sighed after a moment and rose to her feet to stand over its small form.

She silently apologized to its spirit as her father had taught her, before she softly added aloud, "You wouldn't have made it through the winter anyway kid, you're way too young, and it's way too late in the year," as she grasped its forelegs and dragged the fawn out of the thicket.

Marybell glanced up at the sun, and estimated the time to be early afternoon. She mulled over her options for several minutes while she gazed around where she stood, near an almost level bench 50 meters below the crest of the ridge.

She sighed, and climbed up on to the bench and walked stiffly over to the two-meter high face of a stone outcrop that was exposed where the slope steepened again above the flat. She saw there was a small sheltered area under its overhang and considered it as she sighed again, and gingerly seated her bare bottom on the rough bark of a fallen tree. She continued to think about it as she examined the soles of her feet and cleaned the cuts on them with her saliva. She massaged her feet while thinking for several more moments, and then she nodded and stood.

Marybell ignored the pain in her feet as she muttered, "OK Baby Bird, now let's see just how good an Injun' you really are!"

*

Chapter 4

Marybell awoke in the pre-dawn the next morning at that magic moment when the first faint hint of pearl gray glowed in the sky, and all of the birds in the forest begin calling their welcome to the sun, and the safety of its light.

She lay for a moment in the bed of fallen leaves she had made under the overhanging ledge until she became fully alert, then stretched and got up from her primitive couch, and left all its other inhabitants behind...

She winced as she took her first steps around the ashes of her campfire of the previous evening and stood in the growing light, absently scratching at the places where her tiny bed-partners had sampled her skin. She thought about what she had accomplished the evening before, and the meal she had made of grilled fawn's liver. Marybell sighed as she realized that she was incredibly happy, then she squatted and relieved herself and hid her trace with care.

Marybell collected her things when the dawn's light brightened enough for her to distinguish colors and prepared for a hard day's travel, because she knew had to make up the time she lost the previous day. She knelt to load the pack basket she had woven of wiry green saw-briars from the fawn's thicket, after trimming off the thorns that gave the vine its name. She placed her hammerstone in the bottom, then the crude fire drill and the wooden platform she had carved for it.

She added a small bundle of fresh sinew stripped from the fawn's leg tendons and the bundled remains of its hide that she had removed after gritting her teeth and gutting and skinning the little animal as her parents had taught her.

She added several handfuls of thin venison strips next that she had carefully sliced from the fawn's flanks and hindquarters and dried over her fire on a rack of sticks. Finally, she loaded two more items that she had begun making with hope as the sun went down and had finished in the small circle of light from her fire before lying down for the night.

She closed the crude little basket with its lid of woven vines and tied her three un-fledged arrows to its side. She had made them from the long straight branches she had cut from the arrow-wood shrub down by the stream the day before and had tipped them with points flaked from the chert she had found.

Marybell smiled as she thought that with the same materials and tools,

her grandfather would have produced arrows that were works of art, but as she looked at her handiwork again in the light of dawn, she pursed her lips and nodded.

“Not real pretty, but they’ll do, if I can find some feathers.”

Then Marybell spread her legs and carefully fitted on the breechclout she had cut from a strip of the fawn’s hide she had first cleaned by scrapping the flesh side with a flint spall then had crudely cured with ashes and smoke over her fire.

She placed the flesh side in between her legs and tucked the ends under her belt in front and back so that the outer flaps fell, and displayed the designs she had gleefully drawn on the skin with a charred stick.

She sat on the fallen tree next, and tied on the bag moccasins she had made from the thickest part of the fawn’s hide over its kidneys. She laced them around her feet with the hair-side out with thongs she had sliced from its hide. Then she stood and shrugged on the pack basket’s shoulder straps that she had also cut from its skin.

Marybell finally picked up her new bow and looked at it again in the growing light. She remembered that she had worked on it for more than three hours in the afternoon sunlight. She had whittled the stave to shape and then scraped it with her knife and pieces of flint to thin and taper the back. She had only peeled away the bark from its front, called its belly by her grandfather and had taken care to not damage the natural layer of cambium beneath it, again as he had taught her.

When she had been cautiously satisfied with her work at last, the first bow she had ever tried to make, Marybell had used most of her cord to string it. She had looked at its surprisingly symmetrical curve for a long while in the fading light of the day, until with a sigh and a shrug she had raised the little bow and drawn it to its fullest extent.

Marybell had felt its power as she held the taunt string to her cheek for an instant, before slowly relaxing her pull. She had dropped to her knees then, and sobbed as she gently placed the bow on the ground before her and covered her eyes with her hands as she offered a fervent prayer of thanks to her ancestors - because now she knew that she would not fail her trial.

*

Chapter 5

Marybell had made her way along the moss-covered stone ledges of a

ridge crest and through the stunted trees and shrubs clinging to its wind-swept top for several hours when she came to a slight depression. She found a clump of low growing juniper bushes in full fruit in the windbreak that it formed.

She paused in the warmth of the mid-morning sun as the breeze ruffled her auburn hair then she heard faint cluckings and scratching sounds, and her eyes opened wide.

She groped in her ration bag and retrieved two of the smooth pebbles she had collected back in the stream. She placed her bow aside and moved like a ghost around the bushes, until she spied three plump grouse busily gorging themselves on the dusky blue berries that had fallen on the sandy ground.

Marybell hurled first one stone then another, again without conscious thought and while two of the birds exploded into frantic flight, the third lay flopping on the ground.

Marybell leaped to it like a pouncing cat and wrung its neck as her mother had taught her to do with chickens in their village. She knelt and opening the bird with her knife, drew its steaming entrails as she had also learned.

She hung the bird to cool by forcing its neck into a forked branch on the bush, then plopped down to sit cross-legged in the sunny stillness by the clump of junipers and began to fletch her arrows with the bird's tail feathers.

*

Marybell was trotting urgently along the stony crest of the ridge in the late morning when she spotted a large and weather-blasted pine tree in her path. Its roots gripped the crevasses in the moss-covered rock, and while the tree was bent and twisted from the winds that had swept over it for a century, it had prevailed and it lived.

She halted before it sensing there was a marker for her here, and there was. A black yarn fluttered from a dead branch three meters over her head.

"Cute Bird Nose - real cute!" she gritted, while she looked angrily around for some way to get the marker and fretted about how little time she had left to complete her test. She considered scaling the gnarled tree but then she noted all the sharply pointed stubs of broken-off branches on its trunk and knew this was not her best choice. She looked wildly about as she sought a safer way to reach the yarn, until she glanced at the tangle of dried limbs that had fallen around the base of the tree over the years, and saw a fuzzy black spot on one branch on top of the pile.

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Marybell became instantly calm and slightly dizzy, from relief as well as dehydration. She smiled and walked to the pile of branches, and carefully unwound what she knew was her last marker. She then used the fallen limb her father had indicated to delicately retrieve her next-to-last yarn from the high limb.

“Thanks for the lesson in patience Bird Nose, I reckon I needed it,” she sighed as she dropped to sit on a mossy rock, and shook her head at what she knew was her father’s final subtlety.

The girl gazed at the thirteen marker yarns looped around her wrist for several minutes while she panted with fatigue. She gauged the sun’s position after her breathing slowed then turned to look down the ridge, in the direction indicated by the tree limb where the yarn had fluttered.

She was glumly considering the quickest way along her new route as well as wondering how much farther she had to go, when she noted a wisp of smoke rising from the valley below.

“Gadammit!” Marybell snarled in a tone that suddenly was mature. She leaped to her feet and shrugging her pack basket off, rummaged in it for two items. Then she re-packed it to her liking after using one of them, and tucking the other in her belt.

Marybell pulled the little basket back on her shoulders and taking up her bow and arrows, stalked in grim silence down the ridge along her new route toward, the faint plume of smoke that she knew came from her parent’s campfire...

*

Chapter 6

“Hey husband, finish your breakfast, it’s not nearly time yet,” the man’s wife said gently, as he poked at the appetizing brunch she had set before him. He had held his worry for Marybell within himself stoically ever since he had left her alone in the wilderness.

*

The girl’s image, standing at attention in the glade with her eyes squeezed shut and naked in the morning sun was burned forever into his memory. He had been humbled and honored by the trust his daughter had shown when he left her there, and although he had received many honors in his life, his daughter’s trust in him was the highest of all.

The man had hidden his feelings ever since leaving her though, to keep

from magnifying his wife's own worries - hidden except during the few times he had fretfully slept during the last two nights.

He, who always slept without a sound because of his nature as well as his training, had softly and worriedly called out to Marybell as he dozed, over and over again... He knew he had done this because his wife had gently wakened him each time and whispered of his mutterings, and her concerns as they comforted each other.

*

"She will be fine. You taught her and you are the best," the woman smiled as she placed a steaming mug of coffee beside his plate.

"You trained her too and you are better than I am," he replied as he lifted the mug with a slight smile even as he kept his anxious frown. The woman looked up from where she knelt beside the cook-fire and her eyes shone with ancient wisdom.

"She was born to us with depths and great strengths in herself that she will discover when she needs them, or already is," the woman stated with calm certainty, "And Eagle Beak, you know that I speak true."

"Yes Bean Blossom, I know in my heart and blood that you do," he sighed, "But my mind also knows the real dangers out there for a naked young girl."

"My mind does too my husband, my Wiowah. But it also know that you eaten very little since she began her trial.

"So if you don't take food now, you will be too weak to greet her properly when she returns to us," the woman replied with certainty in her voice, and a slight grin.

"Squaw-whipped, that's me," the man grunted, "But I will not eat alone."

She immediately moved the three-legged spider skillet away from the coals and rose to join him at their folding camp table. "Share with me then," she murmured as she took his hand. They then each fed the other from the single plate, in a ritual of communion they had formed over the years of their marriage.

The two were sitting and holding hands after their meal when the man suddenly gave a start, and glanced up toward the red and gold foliage on the mountain ridge above their campground.

"What is it, Lover?"

"I just got a feeling," he whispered. "I think we better go out to the targets."

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"It's way too early," his wife said. "Sit with me and take more time to settle your food."

"I think we should go out there, now," he insisted with a smile as he untangled his long legs from the table and held out his hand. She took it with a smile and rising from the table without another word, walked to the parking lot at his side.

They seated themselves cross-legged on the ground at the edge of the graveled space before the tents where they were waiting with the other parents, in a seldom-used campground in Virginia's George Washington National Forest. The couple looked down onto a little grassy meadow below where they sat, and the four new straw-man targets the parents had all set up the day before.

Marybell's father was tall and gracefully muscular with black hair and shinning brown eyes and a face that would have been ruggedly handsome, except he had taken his nose on the warpath too many times.

Her mother was petite and delightfully curvy with chestnut hair and hazel eyes in a face of serene beauty, or of wicked elfin mischievousness according to on her mood. They had little body hair because of their ancestry and their skins were the color of new copper.

*

The sun was halfway up into the sky and it was ten o'clock according to the man's military watch when the Elder of the tribe who was monitoring the trials, sat down beside them with a coffee mug steaming in his hand. Marybell's father knew him as a one-time member of the Virginia House of Delegates, and as a lawyer noted for winning his cases without having to go to trial. He had also had written an Army field manual on evasion and survival from his personal experience in the ongoing war with the Chin.

The Elder nodded to Marybell's mother then asked her father, "Did you get a feeling just now?"

"Yep."

"Me too."

Marybell's mother said nothing, but she suddenly squeezed her husband's hand with a grip like an iron clamp. He knew that she shared his new hope now and smiled to her gently. He caressed her wrist with his other hand while they waited in the brilliant quiet of the Indian Summer morning, a season named for a reason the dominant culture had forgotten but which the Pamunkey remembered quite well, with grim humor ...

*

The sun was high into the sky and the meadow insects were in full song but it was still well before noon, so the three adults were nodding slightly in the warmth of its rays when a “thunk” sounded from the direction of the targets...

Marybell’s father bounded to his feet in time to see a second arrow bury itself next to the first piercing the dummy with black yarn streamers on its topknot. Then he heard a shrill but very business-like war whoop, and to his everlasting joy his daughter leaped from the edge of the wood and raced toward her target, a feather bound in her hair and her face and body streaked with war paint.

She reached the straw dummy in seconds and giving another keening cry as she leaped into the air at full speed, buried a stone-bladed war club deep in the dummy’s head and snatched away its yarn topknot as she sailed past it.

Her war cries were chilling to the other parents waiting in the camp...

Marybell landed easily and trotted back to her starting point at the tree line. She shrugged on her pack-basket and after retrieving her bow and nocking her last arrow, paced with formal dignity to meet her father and mother as the other parents rushed from their tents.

Marybell halted before her parents and the Elder. She stood breathing easily for a moment, then she un-nocked her arrow and kneeling, laid it with her bow at her father’s feet. She rose again and silently offered him the topknot trophy she had just taken.

The man accepted it and after plucking off the clinging strands of straw tucked the yarns under her belt to acknowledge her first coup as a warrior.

He pointed to her left wrist and she raised her arm proudly to show the marker yarns looped around it. He counted them and nodded to the Elder at his side. The man turned back to his daughter and spoke for the first time with a smile, “You found them all, so you do not need to tell me where I left them for you.”

Marybell sighed, “I just knew there would be thirteen - one for each year.”

Her father nodded at her logic. His face remained wooden but his eyes gleamed at her earnestness.

Then Marybell shrugged off the rawhide shoulder straps of her pack basket and dropped it to the ground. She opened its lid and removed the grouse, and shyly offered it to her mother.

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“She did say that she would bring dinner,” the man rasped in a voice suddenly hoarse without taking his eyes from his daughter. Her mother gravely examined the neatly cleaned bird, its cavity stuffed with the lemon-scented leaves and berries of the spicebush, a traditional Indian seasoning. She just nodded to Marybell with pride shining on her face - and the man desperately fought an urge to sweep his daughter into his arms.

He forced himself to remain calm, and took up her weapons instead to inspect them while she stood quivering at attention. He hung the bow over his forearm as he looked her arrow first. It was tipped with a point of gray chert that while roughly flaked, was very functional and quite sharp. She had cemented the point into a split in the shaft that was longer than her arm with pine resin and bound it with thin strands of heat-dried sinew.

She had made the shaft from a branch of the arrow wood shrub and he noted the scorch marks where she had heated it over a fire to cure and straighten it, and that its fletching of split grouse tail feathers was fixed to its nock end with resin and finely trimmed sinew bindings. He raised the arrow and sighted along its length, and found it smoothly scraped and acceptably straight.

He nodded his approval to Marybell as he handed the arrow to the Elder and turned his attention to her bow. He saw that while it was short and not finely finished, its arc was symmetrical and it was the right size for her arms and arrows. He raised it and grasping the string she had twisted from most of the cord she had accepted from him, flexed the bow gently several times, and then drew it to its full extent.

He felt its surprising strength, and realized that the angry red welt on the inside of his daughter’s left breast was from the slap of the bowstring when she had killed her target moments before.

He nodded in approval to her again and handed the bow to the Elder, who accepted it as he passed her arrow on to the other adults.

The man pointed to her pack basket next, and asked a silent question with his eyes.

Marybell took his cue. She knelt, and placed the contents of her little container in a neat row at her father’s feet. He ignored her things as he picked the basket up and looked at it briefly and with a slight smile, before he passed it to his wife for her ultimate judgment.

The woman examined the basket her daughter had created and nodded her approval after a moment then using the same regal gesture as her ances-

tor Powhatan would, handed it to the Elder.

“What else do you have to show me?” her father whispered as he knelt before her and her array, and gazed at the girl rather than her handiwork. Marybell’s eyes were ringed with dark circles of fatigue, her bruised and scratched body was covered with dust and scrapes and insect bites, and her hands were stained with tree sap and blood. He saw that her face was more adult now, and much of the lingering baby-fat she had three days before was gone now...

She gave a happy sigh and began to display her work. She silently offered him a handful of her smoked-dried venison strips first, and he selected one and chewed a bite as he considered its flavor. Then he smiled at Marybell and handed the rest of them up his wife for her to sample and share with the others if she found them acceptable. She did both.

Marybell untied the drawstrings of the bag from her belt next and removing several flint spalls, a knobby brown pebble with one side ground away and a piece of quartzite that showed use as a whetstone, placed them on the grass before him.

“Thank you for the backup you gave me, Sir, and the use of the bag you put it in,” she said with a slight grin as she handed it to him.

He accepted the bag with a grave nod, and after feeling the shape of the field ration that was still in it, placed it on the grass at his side. He pointed to her fire-bow set next, and when she handed it to him, he could see from the drill’s charred tip and the blackened notches in the fire stick that she had used it effectively.

The man forced himself again to remain calm and objective, as he examined her roll of fawn skin and little bundle of fresh sinew. He saw that they were hastily cured but useable, and handed them up to the Elder with her fire drill.

He looked at his daughter kneeling before him, and once again had to fight back his urge to take her in his arms. He pointed instead to the brown pebble with a freshly abraded facet, and the small object capped with a leaf on the grass before her.

She untied the twisted vine that secured the cover with a wide grin, and handed him a tiny clay pot, colored gray and mottled with black from its firing in a campfire. It was crudely formed and lopsided, but sound and was still partially filled with the bright yellow ochre paste she had made from grindings of the limonite iron ore pebble she had mixed with rendered fat

from the fawn.

The man smiled with grim pride as he looked at where she carried the rest of the yellow paste, on her body in her interpretation of a Pamunkey brave's war paint. After gazing at the pot again a bit longer than was really necessary, he passed it up to his wife and the Elder.

Marybell finally offered him the hammerstone, "Thank you for letting me use this, Sir, it was very helpful."

"I am happy that you found it of use Daughter," the man replied in a formal tone. "But it is yours. Your grandfather sent it to you."

"How'd he know I'd find it," the young girl gasped, losing her rigid control for a moment.

"He told me where to place it so you would find it."

Marybell gasped again as her eyes opened wide in questioning wonder, "You mean..."

"Remember, Daughter, I told you that you would not walk alone."

Marybell paused for a long moment as she stared at her father, then she whispered with wide eyes.

"You're right. It's like I got a feeling whenever I needed some help, and then I sort'a always knew what to do and when it was time to do it."

He said nothing because he couldn't trust his voice, he rose instead and gracefully handed his daughter to her feet.

She murmured suddenly, "Oh, I'm sorry I forgot. Here's your knife back Sir," as she lifted the sheath from her neck and offered it to him.

Her father silently accepted it, and drawing the small blade, examined it carefully. Then after testing its edge with his thumb, he pressed it to his forearm and carefully shaved a clean swath through the sparse hairs there. He wiped its blade and re-sheathed it, and handed the knife back to her with a smile.

"Nice sharpening job. It's yours. I made it for you," Then his formal manner suddenly went away, like an outgoing tide.

Marybell sighed then and smiled brilliantly as she relaxed as well, and before her father's eyes changed from a tense young warrior back into his thirteen-year daughter. He lost it - and stood quivering in silence with his head bowed, straining for self-control for several moments - long enough for Marybell to whisper, "What's wrong Daddy?"

"Nothing dear," her mother murmured as she caressed her husband's shoulder. "I think it's just something that got caught in his eye."

“What was it, Daddy? A bug?” Marybell asked with concern.

“No,” her father finally gasped, “No, Darlin’ it’s just something that hit me real hard...”

“Are you gonna’ be OK Daddy?”

“Yes Sweetheart, I’m fine now,” he whispered as he raised his head, and showing the same brilliant smile as his daughter, hugged the young girl to his breast for a long moment. Then he laughed and grasped her around the waist.

Marybell giggled and tensed herself. Her father flexed his powerful arms and hoisted his daughter aloft, and with a sudden heave, tossed her into the air over his head. The young girl squealed in glee as her mother and the other parents called, “Fly Baby Bird! Fly!” while they cheered and applauded.

He caught her by the waist and lowered her to the ground again and gave her a kiss on her sweaty and stained forehead - and was sad with the knowledge that this would be the last time they would share this simple pleasure they had enjoyed since she was a baby.

The two stood quietly holding each other for a moment, until Marybell’s mother stepped forward and took her daughter’s hand as she growled sweetly to her husband, “Out of the way Bird Nose, it’s my turn now - and you go change your shirt, OK!”

“As for you, Young Lady” she ordered, “It’s time for you and all your little traveling companions to take a bath. Let’s go.”

Marybell looked at her mother in puzzlement for a moment as she absently scratched at her scalp, then her eyes widened. She gasped, “Yes Ma’am!” and walked with her mother to the campground’s bathhouse.

The Elder collected Marybell’s handiwork and placed it into a neat array at one side of the campground’s fire pit while her father retrieved her straw man target and added it to the display.

He also freed the war club she had sunk into the dummy, and saw that it was headed with a chert nodule the size of his daughter’s fist. She had roughly chipped it to form an ax blade and bound it into the cleft of a split green hickory limb with fire-dried sinew.

He handed the club the old man, who hefted it several times then felt its edge. The Elder grunted in respect as he passed it back to Marybell’s father who looked at it again, and shook his head in silent wonder at the wicked weapon his daughter had created.

Their examination of her other two arrows was easy since both had

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pierced the middle of the straw man, so the chert heads were visible on one side as were their fletching on the other. The two men left the arrows in place, agreeing that Marybell had proven them quite effective. Marybell's father then nodded to the Elder with a rueful grin and excused himself then jogged back to their tent in obedience to his wife to get a fresh shirt, one not smeared with yellow war paint.

He rejoined the Elder and the other parents at the edge of the parking lot several minutes later where they all sat now as they waited for their own children to come in, and chatted idly to mask their tension.

*

Marybell trotted up to her father a half hour later. She was scrubbed and shinny-nosed now and wore an oversized paleface tee shirt and modern gym shoes. She handed him the fawn-skin breach clout she had made, and her moccasins. He looked at them for a moment before handing them to the Elder, with an almost straight face.

The old man nodded as he examined a moccasin, and saw how Marybell had constructed it simply and without sewing. He nodded in approval to her father, then when he examined her breechclout he chuckled. Marybell had decorated both its front and rear flaps with well-executed cartoon figures of crawly bugs and evil-eyed snakes. The Elder's chuckle caused her to giggle, and her giggle earned her a belly laugh from her father.

He got to his feet then and carried her clothing to her trophy pile by the fire pit with Marybell. As they stood gazing at her handiwork, he wrapped an arm around his daughter's shoulders and gave her a squeeze, "You smell a heap better Baby Bird, get anything to eat?"

"Mommy had chicken soup ready when I got out of the shower," the girl replied dreamily, "And she's roastin' the grouse now."

"Good." Then seizing this moment while the two of them were alone, he said quietly, "You did very well, Daughter and you will never know how proud I am of you."

"Yes I will, Daddy," Marybell whispered as she hugged him fiercely, "Cos that's how proud I am of you."

He stood returning her embrace for a long while, until he could speak again. Then he kissed the top of her still-damp head, "Thanks Sweetheart, that's good to know. But now why don't you go grab a nap? I'll call you when the others start showing up."

"Honest?"

“Honest Injun!”

“Oh, Dad!” She humph’ed over her shoulder as she turned with a giggle and trotted back toward the tents.

*

Chapter 7

Marybell’s father felt the anxiety of other parent’s. He had remained alert and watchful after Marybell’s triumphant return because their children were also his pupils, so he was the first to spot the naked boy who appeared at the tree line in the middle of the afternoon.

The boy cocked a spear thrower and launching his missile with an over-hand heave, sunk a wooden shaft with a sharpened and fire-hardened point deep into his straw man. Then he sounded a credible war whoop and racing to his target, stabbed it with a second sharpened wooden stave and swung his spear-thrower like a saber to break off the dummy’s head.

*

Marybell heard his war cry and popped out of her parent’s tent just in time to see the boy plant his foot on the bundle of straw, jerk its red yarn topknot away and scream in victory and relief as he held it to the sky. She trotted to stand beside her father and watched as the boy walked slowly and proudly to meet his parents, with his spear thrower on his shoulder and the topknot in his hand, and red yarns hanging from his wrist.

She watched as his father and the Elder greeted him and inspected his work and his scraped and scratched body and bleeding feet. His father counted the yarns on his wrist and smiled in confirmation to the Elder. When the old man nodded his approval, the boy’s mother joined her husband and they led their son George whose tribal name Marybell knew as Red Feather, to the bathhouse.

Marybell smiled as she watched his mother wrap her arm around his shoulders, in spite of his embarrassed efforts to shrug it away.

Her father seated himself on the ground again and Marybell plopped down beside him.

“I’m glad for George,” Marybell whispered to her father.

“We all are, because of who we are,” he said quietly as he patted her shoulder, and kept watching the edge of the forest...

*

Marybell felt her father tense about an hour later, and then she spotted

David. The boy burst into the meadow from the trees and sprinted to his target in a blazing run. He covered the distance in seconds then with a yell that started in a deep tone but broke into a falsetto as his voice cracked, smashed his straw man with a heavy stone-tipped club, and ripped away its topknot.

“You can see why we call him ‘Thunder Cloud’,” Marybell giggled.

“Yep,” her father murmured as he got to his feet and handed her up, “And we maybe should have called you ‘Hawkeye’ instead because you’re a pretty good spotter.

“But now let’s listen.”

David’s mother, who was also his referee, greeted him with pride, and after counting his red yarns inspected his club, and the moccasins he had fashioned from the hide of a half-rotted deer carcass. Marybell saw the Elder nod his approval and smiled as she watched the woman absorb her son’s unique new aura for only a moment, before she pointed him toward the bathhouse, urgently...

*

The evening shadows were lengthening now as the sky darkened, and the adults and the three youths all sat waiting for Carole to come in. Marybell’s father knew the story of Carole’s mother, and that the woman had adamantly refused to move to the reservation when her husband had proposed living like their ancestors. She left him and their child for the “real world” as she termed it instead and had vanished into the Byzantine culture in the studios of the Network, the world-wide media monopoly.

Carole’s father had brought his daughter to the reservation after the split when the girl was nine years old. Marybell’s father knew her as tall for her age, dark haired, dark-eyed and slender. She was also very intelligent - and very private.

He had found Carole to be a good pupil in the academy and she had shown the necessary willingness and ability over her three years of survival training to qualify her for the trial. Therefore when he had told both her and her father that she was capable of it, she had insisted on taking it with quiet stubbornness despite her father’s concerns.

Marybell’s father, as Commandant of the Academy told Carole’s father later in private that the girl should be allowed to take her trial because he sensed she needed to prove herself for some reason. The man had then reluctantly agreed then to evaluate his daughter honestly and lay out a course for her to match what he thought her abilities to be.

The man didn't know, but Marybell's father intuitively sensed what Carole could not put in to words. Her passing this test was a way to cut all the ties of guilt she felt to her mother and so prove herself, to herself.

*

The sky grew darker and the shadows lengthened over the meadow and Marybell's father felt the air of urgency and unease building in the waiting group. He also sensed the silent tension Carole's father was trying to hide as he waited for his daughter, and he knew the other parents did as well. He had decided to speak when, as the first evening star first blinked a dark figure erupted from the grass at the foot of the last straw man.

Marybell's father grunted in admiration when he realized Carole must have hidden nearby and waited with frozen patience until the evening was shadowy enough for her to snake silently through the grass on her belly to her target under their unseeing eyes.

The girl screamed in rage and triumph as she grabbed the dummy's head and viciously hacked at its neck until the lump of straw was severed. Then wearing nothing but the camouflaging mud she had smeared on herself from head to toe, Carole walked serenely to meet her father. She carried only her trophy and the tiny knife he had given her, but many yellow yarns fluttered from her wrist.

She swayed slightly from the weakness of hunger as she stood before him, then she smiled and silently handed him her unopened field ration.

Her father gazed at her a moment until he smiled and whispered hoarsely, "Good Going, Daughter, real good." He hugged her tight for many heartbeats then, and got his shirt quite muddy as he did so.

He finally released her with a sigh and a kiss on her dirt-smeared cheek. She smiled at him while all the others remained silent in respect of the emotion showing between the two.

Then still without a word, Carole turned and walked toward the bathhouse alone, as the night sky came alive and thousands of stars began twinkling over her head.

*

Chapter 8

The group met again by the fire pit later that evening as a full moon was rising over the ridge. The proud families had fed and comforted their children and they all now wore their traditional Pamunkey summer garb of deerskin breechclouts for the men and small, decorated doeskin aprons for the women along with moccasins, and bandages as necessary. The adults also wore their tribal honors painted on their foreheads.

Marybell's father took a stand in front of the fire crackling in the pit and nodded to the four young warriors, as they had all proven themselves to be. They stepped forward and formed a line with their backs to the fire.

He moved to face Marybell and the other parents who were referees took places before their children. Marybell's mother took a place behind her husband and George's stood behind hers as well.

The Elder walked into the circle of firelight then and they all stilled. He was dressed in a breechclout as the other men, and wore a single eagle feather bound into his gray hair.

He carried a narrow stone slab with three shallow cavities chipped into its surface. The cavities held small amounts of paint in the colors of the trials the old man had mixed for the occasion.

He stepped to Carole's father first and offered him the stone slab. The man dipped his fingertip into the yellow paint without hesitation, and drew a vertical line on his daughter's forehead over her right eye as he whispered, "For finding your way." Then he dipped his finger again, and made another yellow line above her left eye, as he murmured with a slight smile, "For your timing."

Marybell's father watched while the Elder then handed the stone palette to Carole's father and did what only he had the authority to do, award or withhold a third mark for a warrior's style.

The old man stood before the quivering tense young girl and paused for a moment, then he dipped his finger, and gently grasping the girl's jaw to steady her, drew a broad red line down the middle of her forehead. He

smiled, "For your heart..."

Carole held herself rigid, except for two tears that trickled down her cheeks. Her father who wore two red marks and one yellow on his brow gripped her hands and smiled at his daughter with all his love shining in his eyes - and the closed young girl finally showed that she knew his feelings for her by tremblingly returning his smile. Then Carole suddenly hugged him and whispered, "Thank you, Daddy - for everything."

*

"For your speed," David's short and sturdy mother, who wore three red marks on her own forehead, crooned as she reached up and drew a broad red mark above her son's right eye.

Then she said woodenly, as she drew a yellow line over his left to show that he had missed a marker, "For your tracking,"

The Elder passed the paint pallet to the woman to hold and gazed at the boy who stood before him at a brace as he struggled to remain impassive. The old man smiled after a moment as he drew a broad red line down the youth's forehead and said, "For your strength."

Marybell's father knew David's mother had served two enlistments in Special Forces units ranging deep behind the Chin lines. He knew of her gritty toughness, but was not surprised when she suddenly sobbed as her son looked down at her with a happy grin.

The Elder offered the colors to George's father next, and the man drew two red marks on his son's forehead with quiet pride, to honor his son's speed, and skill at path finding. The Elder added a third red mark as he told the elated boy, "For your ingenuity."

The youth stood in awe for a moment, then he sputtered, "T-Thank you Sir!"

"Thank all your ancestors first - beginning with these two," the old man replied with a dry sniff as he nodded toward George's parents.

The Elder finally turned to Marybell's father and the girl standing quiet attention before him. He offered the palette of paint and her father unhesitatingly dipped his finger and grasping her chin, made a black mark down Marybell's forehead over her right eye.

"For meeting your challenges," he whispered as he looked at her with love and pride.

"For recognizing your obligations," he whispered again as he made a second black mark above her left eye. Then he stepped back and accepted the

slab from the Elder.

The old man gazed at the young girl standing rigidly before him for several long heartbeats, then he precisely drew a third streak of black down the middle of her forehead.

“This is for what you have done for yourself now and what you will do for us all in years to come...”

Marybell stared up at the two men blankly for a moment then, she gasped.

Her father saw by her widening eyes that she realized what had just happened - they had made her a “Werowance”. She was now a War Chief of the Pamunkey, with all the honor and obligations granted to only one other alive.

Marybell’s father smiled to her as she shook her head angrily at her sudden tears, then when she smiled back to him, he knew she could see his love and joy for her - and the three black streaks on his own forehead...

The Elder, his own forehead marked with black and red streaks cleared his throat a moment later, and broke the heavy emotion in the group.

“While not particularly traditional for our tribe, I happen to have several coolers in my truck that are filled with champagne on ice,” he commented dryly. “I think it may be appropriate to investigate certain paleface methods of celebrating successful events, purely in the interests of research of course.”

Marybell’s mother deadpanned, “And I believe we may be assured that our ancestors would have used it too, if they’d had it.”

The other parents answered with approving grunts and chuckles...

*

Later in the evening after the adults had offered a number of toasts to the new warriors, and had allowed them to return the honor several times as well, Marybell and the other youths placed their straw men on the fire along with some other of their handiwork to burn as offerings to their ancestors.

Marybell burned her basket and fire drill and all her deerskin things, while George burned his spears and David his moccasins, which made his mother smile in relief.

Carole had made nothing during her trek so all she had to burn as her offering were her yarn markers and topknot trophy.

The tall young girl was gazing pensively into the flames when Marybell went to her side and slid an arm slide around her waist. When she turned, Marybell said, “I’d like for you to have this if you want it,” and offered the

little pot of yellow paint, "It's the color your dad gave you."

Carole looked at Marybell for a moment, then whispered, "Thank you, I would like to have it." Carole stood looking at Marybell for another moment then impulsively threw her arms around her.

"Thank you, thank you - friend..." Carole sobbed.

*

The adults were lounging and quietly talking among themselves while the flames from the straw targets and offerings were dying down as they continued researching the appropriateness of the Elder's non-traditional addition to their ceremony by both the light of the fire and of the full moon.

Marybell watched her father as he sat on a blanket on the ground and leaned against a log seat, with her mother nestled in one arm and the magnum they were both evaluating close by. She saw that George's parents with the Elder's help, were in a close three-way investigation, and that David's mother seemed to be interested in exploring one with Carole's father as well.

It dawned on Marybell after several moments that she and the other new warriors sitting in a row across the fire from the adults were now being given their final direction marker. She took the hint and motioning to the three, led them silently out of the circle of firelight.

Marybell told them about what she felt to be their final marker with whispers, and touches...

When the three grasped her message, they made altars in the soft grass of the meadow and sacrifice their virginity to their ancestors.

Marybell and her partner fumbled a bit at first, and she could hear the other two being awkward as well. She was anxious to complete this last part of her trial correctly however and knew her friends were too so she led them in repeating their offerings a number of times and with some very innovative variations...

*

Marybell's parents were awake and laying quietly holding hands as their bodies cooled, when their daughter poked her head through their tent flap.

"Got room for one more?" Marybell yawned as she pushed in to the tent.

"Get in here, Young Lady," her mother replied, the mock sternness of her words belied by the flash of her smile in the moonlight filtering through the tent's fabric. She and her father moved apart and made a space for her between them as they had done ever since she was a child.

Marybell nestled in between the two with a happy sigh, and squeezed

their hands in hers as they both kissed her forehead. Then with a sleepy giggle that was not at all little girlish, she murmured, “Now I know why you two always do what you call wrestling so much!

“It’s a lotta’ fun!”

Her parents both snorted with barely suppressed laughter then her mother gasped, “That’s nice dear.” This made her father sputter, and earned Marybell two more kisses on her forehead, as well as a double hug.

After his mirth faded however, her father called her by her tribal name and used their ancient Pamunkey language as he whispered gently, “Now sleep in peace Calling Dove, because you have done very well.”

Her mother finished softly in the same dialect, “And Powhatan smiles on you as his daughter, and a true warrior of our tribe.”

*

Chapter 9

The young warriors returned to the reservation and their academy after their wilderness tests as if nothing of consequence had happened on a routine fall camping trip with their parents, but now their training became much more intense.

The Elders also began teaching the four, as they did all who passed the trial about the deeper meanings of the Pamunkey culture and the differences between it and that of the world beyond their reservation. All of the older children received some of this training to prepare them to function in the outside world with effectiveness as well as safety, since Pamunkey cadets always enlisted in the Army at the age of 16.

Those who had successfully completed their trial however were trained to a much greater degree and were usually accepted into the Special Forces because of their unique abilities.

Marybell, Carole, David and George had all known each other before, but now as they shared their experiences during their trials, they bonded and became close friends.

This bonding among young warriors who had undergone the trial together was common, and the Elders approved and encouraged it. Their bonds lasted for life and added to each individual’s sense of oneness with the tribe, and gave them an inner strength that was generally lacking in the dominant culture outside of the Pamunkey...

*

Chapter 10

Marybell was born in 2251 AD at her parent's home on the Pamunkey reservation in the Virginia tidewater 150 kilometers south of Washington DC, the Capitol of what remained of the United States.

Her father and her mother were both highly educated and of relatively pure Pamunkey blood. They had chosen to live with others of similar background in a style overtly resembling that of their forbears. The Pamunkey tribe was a part of the ancient Powhatan nation of the Eastern Algonquians who had welcomed Captain John Smith when he founded Jamestown in the place he called Virginia six centuries before.

Marybell's parents and their fellow tribesmen lived in homes very similar in appearance to the traditional woven reed mat-covered long-houses of the Eastern Woodland tribes, however they used power from small fuel cells operating on bio-generated hydrogen for their heating and communication needs. They also used strong modern materials to build their houses, as well as fuel cell-powered trail bikes small trucks for transportation.

They usually dressed in garments and footwear they made from deer-skins that they collected and tanned, and preserved the venison either by air drying or smoking it in their traditional way, or in food freezers. They also raised early forms of corn and vegetables from seeds they had back-evolved in their nursery, and completed their nutrition with vitamin supplements as necessary.

The group of 50 people who had started their movement was made up of couples like Puss' parents as well as some singles, including a noted ob-gyn pediatrician, several outstanding lawyers and a number of engineers and scientists. Most of the adults in the village were able to perform the work for their careers electronically via satellite up-links from their wikiups, and left the reservation only when necessary.

The unfortunate ones who worked away from the reservation kept minimal lodgings in the cities and returned to the village as often as their schedules allowed. Those still in the military serving in the Chin war zone on the West Coast or elsewhere, came back whenever they were able to get leave.

Their tribal association had invoked the ancient treaty between the Pamunkey and the government of Virginia to enforce their claim to their reservation. They did this just before the deaths of the last two of their tribesmen living on it a squalid hovel would have forfeited their land. This

enraged a developer of vacation housing, as well as his tacit accomplices in the Richmond bureaucracy.

All of the men of the Pamunkey and most of the women were veterans of many duty tours in the protracted Chin war, so they were quite competent in self protection and nothing of consequence occurred as the new Pamunkey association moved onto their ancestral lands...

*

Chapter 11

The people of Pamunkey blood had been able to maintain their essential integrity over the centuries by keeping their culture at a low profile with respect to that of the “paleys” as they called the dominant culture around them. Therefore, the girl’s mother and father presented their baby, named Marybell on her birth certificate to the Bureau of Population’s local office soon after she was born for registration and for an identifying module to be implanted in her tiny right buttock.

The bored technocrat wielding her instrument said, “You should have whelped her here in our infirmary. They don’t feel anything when they’ve just been sucked out,” as the little girl howled in outrage at the prick of the needle.

Marybell’s parents were both clad in paley clothing. They smiled in unison and responded innocently, “Oh, we are so sorry, we were too thoughtless! But it’s our first time, and we live so far away...”

“Well, you better do better next time. You know what happens to any undocs, whenever we find them...”

“Yes Ma’am and we won’t let it happen again! We promise,” the wide-eyed couple replied, again in unison.

The mother clasped the still howling baby girl in her arms and they hurriedly left the dingy government building before the functionary could realize their total lack of sincerity, and utter contempt for her and her organization.

The man, who had obtained an emergency leave for the birth of his daughter, gripped the steering wheel as they sat in their small truck and quivered in silent furry until his wife opened her shirt and cradled the baby to her full breast and immediately stopping its crying.

She had said with a grin, using the pet name she had given him in a parody of his tribal name of Eagle Beak, “Hang on Bird Nose! We’ll scalp `um

all someday!”

“Yeah Possum Sprout, I will. Until that day...” he replied using the nickname he had given her in return, when she was formally named Bean Blossom.

Then he relaxed and put the truck in motion, and drawled as he looked to her beside him, “What say we fire up the sweat lodge soon’s we get back and when she’s down for her nap, we scrub each other’s backs - `er somthin’...”

Her answering grin told him that it was a plan.

*

Chapter 12

Marybell’s father was a geologist, and an outstanding officer in the U.S. Army’s Special Forces. Her mother had also served in the Special Forces before she had earned a Ph.D. in social psychology. She wrote insightful research papers and lucid texts on the subject now, as well as screenplays of sappy 1X romance vids for the Network. The plays had absolutely no artistic merit, but they were quite lucrative...

The people living on the Pamunkey reservation were mostly couples with one or two children but there also were a few single mothers, either war widows or by choice, and single men and women as well. In spite of the casual nudity of their warm weather dress, the sexuality of the tribe was restrained compared to that of the dominant culture by an unspoken agreement. The singles quietly comforted one another as they desired and what promiscuity occurred among the couples was discrete, and done so that their mates would not be discomforted.

*

Marybell’s parents had met when they were both on active service, and on temporarily duty at the Pentagon in Washington. They had been seeing each other for only two weeks when their eyes met one evening, as they sat over sandwiches in an all-night deli after returning from a weekend hike in the Appalachians.

He had sighed happily and taken her two hands in his, and asked with a slight smile, “How long can we go on meeting like this?”

She returned his gaze then responded in a very quiet voice, “Forever?”

“Suits me!” he replied with a broad grin as he squeezed her hands. They slept together that night for the first time, and were married the following

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morning as soon as the registry window opened in the musty old city building in Arlington.

They knew what they had was rare and genuine and while they both really liked other people, they meshed with and complemented each other so completely that they were sufficient unto themselves in almost all aspects of their lives. They also had both felt the power of the sexual electricity that flowed between them when they first met, and found that the longer they lived together the stronger it became, seemingly more so each day.

Because of the joyful lust they shared, which could be set with only a glance or the touch of a single finger they really had no room in their thoughts for anyone else. They remained monogamous by default as well as by choice but their monogamy was never, ever monotonous...

*

The children of the tribe learned the mechanics of sex along with the rest of their body's plumbing at an early age, as well as the principal of self-control. So, with the example of the adult's restraint before them the children were interested in the subject in a healthy way, whenever they bothered to think about it.

The fact that Network broadcasts, ubiquitous in the dominant culture around them, were not a part of life on their reservation was also a factor in the children's attitude toward sex...

*

One afternoon when she was six or so and her father had been home on leave before his final duty tour, Marybell burst into her parent's bedchamber for some important reason, which she immediately forgot when she saw them on the bed. Her mother was astride her father and pinning his shoulders to the mattress with her hands as she vigorously attacked him with her hips.

"Whatcha' doin' Mommy?"

"Were wrestling Honey and I'm poundin' him to a pulp!" her mother panted with a wicked grin as she leered down at her man, who snorted in sudden laughter.

"Well, don't hurt Daddy, cause he's gotta' read me a story ta'night," the little girl said in a serious little voice.

"Come here Sweetheart and give me a hug!" her father had said, turning his head to her and stretching one long arm out over the edge of the bed. When she scampered over to him and he had embraced her, he whispered, "Because you were so brave, and really stood up for me against Mommy just

now, I'll read you two stories tonight, OK." Then he kissed her on the forehead and released her.

"Now run along and play Sweetheart, and we'll see you in a little while."

The little girl nodded happily and scampered out of the room, dutifully remembering to close the bedroom curtain on her way.

"Wrestlin' huh? Winnin' huh? How about best two falls out of three?" he growled up at the beautiful woman straddling his hips.

"Think you're up to it?" she asked sweetly as she did something to him that was absolutely astonishing, without using her hands.

"Do that again and I will be!" he gasped.

She did - and he was...

*

Chapter 13

Marybell's delivery was easy and after the tribe's pediatrician had quickly cleaned and examined the baby girl and dealt with the umbilical, she grinned as she handed the child to its eager mother.

"Dammit Possum Sprout, she's perfect! You're just trying to put me out of work."

Marybell's mother had smiled radiantly up at her doctor and to her husband who knelt on the simulated dirt floor next to where she lay on a birthing skin, "Yes, I know," she answered as he helped her sit up to receive her child.

She and her husband looked in wonder at the perfection of the infant's tiny hands and body, and its little face as it frowned and fretted for the nipple. The baby girl opened her eyes for a second then before closing them again in contentment as she began to suck.

"Omygod!" the woman gasped.

"What's wrong?" her husband had whispered in sudden worry.

"Nothing's wrong sweetheart," she had murmured happily, "Everything's right, and it's true - and wonderful! She has the mark!"

Then Marybell's mother told her husband and the doctor the story of her family while she nursed the new baby. Beginning in the present, she had softly recited their history and traditions in the formal oral manner she had learned from her mother, all the way back to an ancestor born in 1608. She was a half sister of Matoaka, the youngest daughter of Powhatan, the great chief of the Pamunkey and the other tribes he had united to form his nation in the years before the English landed. Then she told them that Matoaka's

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nickname, meaning “mischievous brat” in the Pamunkey language, was Pocahontas...

Marybell’s mother smiled at her doctor’s friendly disbelief and went on to carefully explain, “Our family tradition is that Powhatan held a ceremony for Matoaka’s coming-of-age when she was twelve, which included a scene where she was allowed to show her power by rescuing a pretended captive from a staged execution ordered by Powhatan.

“The honor of playing the role of the captive was given to the Chief of the new English village, John Smith, whom Powhatan called Nantaquoud, and who stayed for the feasting and celebration that took place after the ritual. My ancestor was born to one of Powhatan’s other wives nine months later, and she was accepted by him as Matoaka’s half sister.

“That little girl had differently colored eyes and as a recessive trait, they have continued to appear about every other generation or so in the girls of my family ever since.”

Then she gently stroked her nursing baby’s forehead and before the now intent gaze of her husband and her doctor, the little girl paused in her feeding and briefly opened eyes that smiled and were a clear and brilliant green.

*

Chapter 14

Six years before Marybell’s birth, China had laid claim to the western coastal states of the United States as well as to Alaska and the western provinces of Canada. Their government had also demanded that all residents not of Chinese origin be evacuated from this vast area. The stated reason for their action was, “The world owes the superior Chinese culture more room in which to flourish”.

Canada meekly acquiesced because it had disbanded its army in the previous century as a goodwill gesture to the world, but the United States had not. Therefore, when the Chin invaded six weeks after their ultimatum the war began.

After a short period of nuclear attacks and counterattacks however, the intensity was dropped by a tacit agreement between the leaders of both China and the US to one of a non-nuclear ground war in the western part of North America.

This conflict had been carried out at a low, brutal level of intensity by the two governments for 19 years by the time Marybell passed her wilderness

trial. They did this as a covert means of retaining the emergency wartime powers they both enjoyed. Beijing and Washington had also found the war to be a crude but method of population reduction, desirable in a time of rising sea levels. So Beijing and Washington continued to recruit troops from the more warlike of their peoples for both reasons, sending them in carefully calculated numbers to the killing grounds after giving them brief, and generally inadequate training.

The Chinese only recruited males as soldiers because their government had re-instituted their traditional masculine-dominant culture at the end of the previous century after what they considered to have been a disappointing, and undignified experiment with tumultuous democracy.

The current Chairman had also made the happy discovery that the Chinese population was becoming more docile now as the proportion of women in it became larger due to the continuing loss of men on the battlefields. This trend was also helped by the fact that the women of China were again being under-educated and that the only media were tightly controlled by the government, both by official policy.

Washington however used women as well as men in its armed services. This was because of military tradition, and the fact that American women were not docile, another long-standing tradition. So battlefield death was an equal opportunity employer at this time in the American Army.

The United States military command were generally not party to the cynical de-population program being conducted by the White House in secret cooperation with Beijing - except at it's highest levels in the Pentagon. The front line troops and commanders just wanted to do their duty and repel the invaders so they did their best, despite what seemed massive blundering at the top.

*

Chapter 15

The U.S. Army used Special Forces units to a great extent, to raid behind enemy lines and disrupted the Chin army's regular operations in the areas that they had seized. These raids were also very good at disrupting the attempts to colonize by the Chin in the territory they controlled. The raids were also quite effective in denying safe havens for the Chin to rest their troops in those areas that were not too radioactive because of the neutron warheads they had rained on the West Coast in their initial attack.

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The United States' Special Forces were able to be so effective, because they attracted a particular type of person - intelligent men and women with stamina, a capacity for independent thought and able to complete rigorous training, or like Marybell, already trained...

Pamunkey warriors from tribe's academy were always welcome in the Special Forces.

*

The tribe had been able to obtain permission to home-school their children on the reservation through skillful use of existing statutes six years after the group established itself. This disgruntled the education establishment because of their loss of control over the indoctrination of the Pamunkey children, as well as those of any other such groups, if this practice became common.

The Army strongly welcomed the idea however because the tribe offered to include cadet-training starting at the first grade if the academy was permitted. The Army liked early military training during this time for obvious reasons, but it was strongly opposed by the education establishment because cadets would learn self-reliance and independent thought, traits that were heresy to their dogma.

The tribe's friends in the Pentagon supporting the academy were careful to not mention in their bureaucratic tussle with the educators, that its proposed instructors were all highly decorated war heroes because independent thinking had been their main weapon on raids behind enemy lines. The informal access Marybell's father and the other Pamunkey had to the top Army command levels because of their achievements was also not mentioned.

The tribe's instructors were careful to not tell their Army champions that their teaching of combat and survival tactics would include traditional Pamunkey ways of training young warriors, as well, and that their children would learn skills to use against any who were not Pamunkey, if necessary.

Several of the senior military staff in the Pentagon who had fought with the Pamunkey knew their capabilities and saw their ultimate goal for the academy, but refrained from comment out of professional courtesy. All except for one, a young one-star Army general who wore the Special Forces patch and a chest full of decorations for valor and wounds. He became interested in the Pamunkey academy and was very effective in bringing it into existence.

*

The general casually asked Marybell's father as they strolled down one

of the echoing long hallways in the Pentagon on their way to lunch on the final day of the approval process. “Hey EB, you guys ever adopt any pale-faces into your tribe?”

Marybell’s father had paused in his stride and looked at the man for a moment. The general returned his gaze impassively.

“Sometimes, if it is the right time, and the right paleface,” said with the faintest of smiles.

“Why do you ask, Sir?”

“Oh, just for background intel,” then the general replied grimly, “Who knows, Colonel, I might want to change jobs someday.”

“I was a Major when I was rotated out, Sir.”

“It takes a Colonel to boss a good academy. Looks better on the org chart and it gives you more throw weight with the supply `crats.” Then he growled as he withdrew a small morocco case from his pocket, “Here, take these. They were mine and they might bring you some luck.”

Marybell’s father gazed in wonder at the little box in his hand for a moment, then opened it and saw the silver spread-eagles denoting the rank of a full colonel in the United States Army. His stunned silence was broken by a click of heels as the general snapped to attention before him. Marybell’s father raised his eyes in time to receive the man’s very formal salute. He automatically hit a brace and returned the honor, and the general broke into a wide grin.

“Ha, got’cha! First Salute! Drinks are on you!”

“Yes Sir! Much paleface firewater comin’ right up, Sir!” Marybell’s father announced, as he realized the full measure of support he and his tribe had just been given by his jump promotion.

“How do you think you will look in a breechclout, Sir?” he then asked with a woodenly neutral face.

“Don’t know. I’ll ask my tailor,” the General replied with equal gravity, as the two turned and strolled on down the hall, their hands clasped behind their backs in military precision.

*

The civilian staff of the Army did not have a clue as to what was occurring when they were directed to equip the Pamunkey cadet academy, but then they rarely had a clue about anything anyway. Therefore, they issued the academy uniforms and teaching materials and other equipment without question, including a stand of military training arms with a generous supply

of ammunition.

*

Chapter 16

The children of the tribe were all schooled in a group without age separation, and the older ones helped tutor the youngsters, providing them with growth models as well as reinforcing their own learning on the various subjects. This group teaching also instilled in them a cohesive spirit and a concern for each other, as was intended.

They learned to read as early as possible from copies of old texts and instruction in writing and beginning arithmetic. The older children were taught history, and the oral traditions and language of their tribe. With respect to the latter, the students were praised when each had memorized the lineage of their own families and could recite it before the class. With respect to the former they were given the facts of history without political comment and were required to form their own judgments, and to present and defend their opinions to the class.

The teachers taught them mathematics and science as they grew older along with modern languages and Latin, and economics. The children learned of classical and modern music, as well as that of their tribe.

The children were good students and eager to learn in spite of their heavy workload, because the teachers never pushed them beyond their limits. When they showed natural talents or an interest they were encouraged to explore them along with the basic subjects.

*

Marybell, now fourteen and clad in her gray cadet coverall, knocked at the open door of her father's office in the academy building. It was the only modern structure on the reservation, and she was between classes.

"Hello, Daughter. Come in," the man said with a smile.

"I have a request sir," the girl announced with a serious face as she stared straight ahead after snapping to attention.

"Then state your request, Cadet Marybell," her father answered in an equally formal tone as he straightened in his desk chair.

"Sir, I would like to get training as a military medic along with my other training, Sir!"

"Who could give you this training Cadet?"

"Dr. Mud Puddle said that she could, Sir!"

The man considered his daughter dispassionately as she stood before his desk. The woman his daughter called 'Mud Puddle' had a tribal name of Healing Waters, and was his wife's best friend. She had delivered Marybell and he knew that the woman had served at least one tour as an Army surgeon.

He considered his daughter for a moment then he nodded.

"This could be a good thing, but we shouldn't do it for just one person. That would be a waste of Dr. Mud Puddle's time and talent.

"So, Cadet Marybell, if you can find others who are interested in this subject, we will explore a combat medic program."

"Than you Sir," Marybell snapped as she saluted her father. When he stood and returned her salute, she executed a precision about-face and marched from his office. The man just shook his head with a smile...

Marybell had always been interested in animals, and from about the age of seven she had brought fallen nestling birds and abandoned baby mice home to nurse. She had more success in keeping them alive than usual, and her father knew she had an instinct for healing as well as survival.

*

She considered her father's requirement for a moment after she left his office then she nodded, and strode down the hall.

"Hi Carole," she called to the tall young girl walking to their next class. "Do you have time to talk some?"

"Sure," Carole answered with a soft smile.

Marybell explained her proposition to Carole and after only a second, the tall girl smiled again, "I would like that. Count me in, friend."

Marybell squeezed Carole's hand then she ignored the chime sounding the next class as she marched back to her father's office.

"There are now two candidates for med training now, Sir!" Marybell announced crisply as she saluted her father.

The man returned her salute with a stern expression, almost.

"Effective troops, I like effective troops! Those who are also smart I like even better. Who is your other candidate, Cadet Marybell?"

"Cadet Carole, Sir!"

The man nodded in approval of her choice, since he had watched Carole develop into an exceptional student ever since she had completed her wilderness trial, and regained the confidence he knew she had lost when her mother had left.

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“Decisive troops who are also smart, I like even better! I will confirm with Dr. Mud Puddle this evening, although I sense, Cadet Marybell that you have already suckered the poor lady in to your wily scheme,” he responded with a twinkle in his eye.

“Sir, the correct terms are ‘recruited’ and ‘brilliant’, Sir!” she replied, as she manfully tried to suppress a girlish giggle.

“Cadet Marybell, I hereby find you guilty of *lèse-majesté* toward my exalted person, therefore you must pay for your crime!” Her father announced in a voice of theatrical doom.

“Give me twenty-five push-ups on the parade ground at the beginning of lunch break, and none of those limpy girly ones either!” I will be watching from my office window as you comply with my order!

“Dismissed!” he growled with twinkling eyes to his daughter.

“Sir!” Marybell saluted with a stern look, almost then turning on her heel, she marched from his Spartan office. The man heard a muffled giggle from in hallway a second later.

He sighed, and smiled with pride and love.

*

The bell rang for lunch break, and the man stepped to the window in his office overlooking the parade ground. He opened it, and waited.

Marybell marched out of the building onto the space a moment later and looking up at his window, saluted. Then as she stood at attention, twenty-four other cadets filed out and formed into a line next to Marybell. The man snorted as he realized what was coming, and saw that his daughter had enlisted all of the cadets above the age of ten.

When they had dressed their line with military precision, Marybell dropped forward on to the ground, pressed her hands to it and waited. The others dropped also one-by-one in succession after Marybell, then the last cadet to drop yelled shrilly, “All are down!”

Marybell then yelled, “All Push!” And the twenty-five cadets executed a classic military push-up, and held it until Marybell shouted, “All Down!” At her signal, the cadets all lowered themselves back to the ground and stayed motionless until Marybell yelled.

“All Up!

“About Face!”

The cadets bounded to their feet, and standing in a line that was now somewhat ragged, turned their backs to the building, and their comman-

dant's office window.

"Present Arms!" Marybell squealed, then she and the other cadets all bent over and waved their bottoms at the window where her father stood watching.

He gripped the window frame as his eyes glistened. He whispered after a moment with his head bowed, "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" as Marybell and the other cadets trotted back into the building.

"At least I have done one thing right in my life..."

The commandant collected himself after a moment and smiled at Marybell's skill in leading people then he strode down the stairs from his office and into the lunchroom. He took a stance just inside the door with his feet widespread and his hands clasped behind his back.

"Cadets! Ladies and Gentlemen. I would like to announce a new course that I believe we will be able to offer. Dr. Mud Puddle seems willing to provide instruction in combat medic training for those who are interested. I will give you more details when they become available.

"I would also like to address the incident that just took place on our parade ground," he continued with a very stern expression then paused.

All of the children in the lunchroom became silent and avoided his gaze, except for his daughter. She sat erect in her seat and was starting to rise, until he laughed.

"This was the first twenty-five gun salute I have ever received, and you cadets have put me four guns ahead of the President!

"Thank you, dear friends!" Then the rugged man whom all the cadets revered saluted the lunchroom and walked back into the hall. He listened to their shrill yells and applause behind him, and smiled as yet another tear trickled down his cheek...

*

Marybell had been a good student from the start. She eagerly wanted to learn, and had routinely leaped ahead of her instructors and the older children who tutored her. As she grew and developed, she remained small like her mother, but somehow inherited a feminine version of her father's extraordinary strength and stamina. She therefore excelled, first in the games for the youngest, then as she grew older at field and track, water sports and gymnastics.

The youngsters were also instructed in basic military skills as soon as they displayed competence on the rifle range. They learned map reading,

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military history and close-order drill on the parade ground. Marybell excelled here as well.

She was good in all of these exercises to such an extent that her father took her aside one day and gently reminded her that her strength and talent were gifts from Manitou, and she should flaunt them lest he take them back.

The energetic and happy young girl had gasped and paused while she looked up at him with big eyes for several moments. Then she had solemnly nodded, and from that moment on, she was very modest about her exceptional abilities.

*

Chapter 17

Marybell matured into a green-eyed version of her small and very feminine mother, but with strength and stamina rare in a girl who was just sixteen. Her mind was quite mature as well so the few times she was patronized because of her small stature by persons who didn't know her she ignored them, until the time came for her to correct their mistake.

Marybell's friends were always amused when someone patted her head, and they gleefully waited until she set matters straight...

*

She now stood with her mother and father at the edge of the parade ground, early in the morning two days after she had graduated from the academy. Carole, George and David, and their parents also stood there along with the rest of her graduated class, and their families. The parents were either making nervous small talk to each other or giving last-minute advice to their impatient children as they all waited for the military transports to arrive.

Marybell and the other graduates wore crisp new coverall uniforms of Army green and small duffel bags lay on the ground at their feet.

"I know it will be hard to call, but try to message us whenever you can, Sweetheart. We want to hear what you have to say, about anything," her mother murmured as she re-straightened Marybell's perfectly straight collar.

"Sure will, Mommy. I'll make the time."

Then the whine of turbo-engines sounded in the distance and rapidly grew in intensity as two gray twin-prop military troop transporters appeared above the tree line. The planes slowly rotated their wings, and supported by their propellers and down-directed jet exhausts, descended onto the parade

ground in a cloud of dust. Doors in their sides ramped down and a red light above each started blinking, slowly...

"Time to go Daughter," Marybell's father whispered gruffly as he hugged her. "Always remember who walks with you."

"We'll look for you in three years when your hitch is up, OK?" her mother whispered as she joined in their embrace.

"I know that all of you walk with me always, and that's why I know I'll come back," Marybell said quietly, "And that's why you don't have to worry about me either." Then she kissed each of her parents on the lips and picking up her duffel, turned to the transports where the red warning lights were now blinking at a faster rate.

Marybell started trotting toward the other cadets mounting the ramps, but then paused and looked back to where her parents stood arm-in-arm. She yelled over the engine noise with a grin that they always remembered, "And when I come back I'll bring dinner, OK!"

Neither of them trusted their voices so all they could do was wave at her until Marybell's small form entered her transporter and its door closed.

Her parents embraced as the craft lifted off, and her mother who had served three enlistments in the Chin war as a Special Forces demolition expert, whimpered into her husband's chest, "Please, please, please..."

Her father, who had fought behind the Chin lines for twelve years, whispered hoarsely as he held his wife close, "You know we're right my love, and she does too.

"We all do walk with her – all of us who have ever lived." As he spoke these words, tears coursed down his cheeks to mingle with those of his wife, damp upon his breast and he was not ashamed.

His hope for Marybell, and his belief in her were in his voice as he whispered after her, "...And what you will do for us all in the years to come."
