

## Deadfall

Jules went to fetch water from the stream on the far side of the ridge that cut the settlement off from sunlight for half of the year. She was tall and thin and envied. She walked behind Mattie – her best friend – placing her feet in the soft indentations that had been carved into the hillside. They were going uphill, and their buckets were empty. They wore short dresses made of animal pelts and repurposed fabric. Jules had feathers in her hair. They looked like they were from the land, of this earth. Formed from dirt and clay. Their blonde hair, however, suggested a different origin. They were born down in the valley, in the settlement, but their parents had migrated here from the east. Both girls were sixteen.

“When are you going to talk to Rob?” Mattie asked. Her long hair moved with the soft breeze like leaves in the tops of trees.

“I want to talk to him, but I’m not ready,” she said.

“You’ll never be ready,” Mattie laughed.

Jules didn’t say anything in reply, and Mattie thought her joke had been a little too sharp. Mattie turned around and saw Jules’ eyes slowly close. The bucket fell from her hand, and her body surrendered and folded to the ground.

Four men from the settlement arrived quickly after hearing Mattie’s screams. There was already blood running out from beneath Jules’ body.

“What happened?” asked one of the men.

“I..I don’t know...she fell down...” Mattie said.

“Was she shot?” another asked.

“There’s no arrow,” another answered.

One of the men knelt down and placed his hand on her warm neck. A thin layer of sweat reflected the morning’s sunlight.

“She’s gone,” he said.

Mattie did not hear this. One of the older women from the settlement had climbed up the hill by this time. She put an arm around Mattie, picked up her bucket, and helped her to the top of the ridge. They disappeared over the other side. There were a few crows flying in the air, unaware or uninterested in what had happened.

A dark, handsome man who looked taller than he really was grabbed Jules’ body, straightened her out and rolled her onto her side.

“What are ya doing, Rob?” one of the men asked.

“I’m trying to find out if she’s been shot, or what,” he said. He ran his hands down the back of her dress, now thick and sticky with warm blood. “There aren’t any holes. There’s nothing on her,” he said.

“Well there must be somethin’, Rob. She didn’t just fall down dead. She’s too young, too pretty for that.” One of the dogs from the settlement sniffed at the growing puddle of blood underneath Jules. Rob slapped the dog with the back of his thick hand. It squealed and ran back down the ridge.

“Maybe she was shot and the arrow went clean through,” one of the men said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it was the Meskwaki.”

The Meskwaki tribe lived in the hills to the west. It was because of them that Jules and Mattie had had to climb up the ridge to get water. Many years ago, when a

group of settlers – including Rob’s grandfather – planted this village, they settled on the banks of the river. This was before they knew the Meskwaki had lived in the hills near the river for thousands and thousands of years. There was much fighting and eventually the settlers moved over the ridge, out of sight from the river. Every now and then a goat went missing or a howling dog ran back into camp with an arrow sticking out of its haunches, but this was tolerated.

The men poked at the girl’s body, but by lunchtime they had found no clues. Finally, with the sun high above, Jules’ mother said they had done enough, and it was time for the family to prepare the body. She made this request with fiery eyes and short words. Her hands and shoulders shook as she stood over the men who were huddled around her daughter.

Late that night, the priest was busy with the final preparations of the body in the back room of the old church. Several men from the town sat in a big circle around a small fire offering explanations to what had happened. They talked about her, but no one said her name.

“It must have been her time,” one of them said.

“Yeah, when it’s your time, it’s your time,” said another. A few other men nodded.

“What does that even mean?” asked Rob. “That’s just some bullshit answer you give when you don’t know the answer.” He looked around the circle, but most of the men were looking at their shoes or the folded hands in their laps. “She was young and healthy and something happened to her. No one just falls over dead and bloody if it’s simply *their* time. There must be a reason. An explanation. Something.”

The men were quiet for a few minutes. There was silence and respect, but little else.

Then, a voice.

“Maybe it was a warning.” Everyone looked toward the voice – some startled by the break in silence, some startled that it was a girl’s voice, and some startled by what she said and the confidence with which she said it.

Rob stood up, out of respect, maybe. Maybe he didn’t want her to be the only one standing. Maybe it was because he didn’t know what else to do.

“What do you mean, Mattie?” Rob asked.

She took a small breath.

“Well, you all remember the story of the missing nights? That was a warning to the settlement, and this might be a warning, too.”

There were some groans around the fire.

“She’s right, guys,” Rob said as he sat back down on the ground. “Let’s listen to what she’s got to say.”

“All I mean,” Mattie continued, “is that’s how we were warned about the early freeze. The sun stood still for four days so our ancestors could harvest all the crops before the freeze came.”

“Yeah, but no one knew why the sun stayed in the sky until *after* the freeze came, and even then...” someone said.

“But they figured they had better take advantage of all the daylight and continue harvesting. We have to trust the signs,” Rob said. “It would be foolish not to.”

“She didn’t...I mean...there’s a reason she died. There has to be,” Mattie said. “Thank you for letting me speak.” She left the group and walked into the gray-black night.

The next morning, fresh light warmed the ridge where boys from the compound had dug up the small patch of red-blood dirt. The bleat and baa of the goats woke Rob. He crawled off his thin mattress. He had dreamt of Jules, but his sleep had been sweet.

Rob walked to the chief’s house at the center of the settlement. The chief no longer went by his Christian name, Jacob. He took his new name from the leader of the Meskwaki tribe. The leader called himself Chief Keeowa and Jacob, who had since traded in his name for a title, quite liked the sound of *chief*. Rob was about to knock on the door of the small, wooden shelter, but the chief was ready for him.

“Rob, come in,” he said through an open window.

Rob walked through the doorway and sat on the floor in the empty room. The chief had a thick black and gray beard that reached past his belly button. Colored beads were randomly woven into his beard. He never wore a shirt, but his shoulders were always covered with animal pelts. The chief had rubbed ash under his eyes to mourn for the young girl.

“Have some tea,” the chief said. “It’s for your song.”

“Thank you, Sir, but I don’t know what that means.”

“Every man has the song,” the chief said as he touched his chest. “It’s the beat, beat, beat that keeps you going. It keeps you living, keeps you loving, keeps you sleeping, even.”

Rob scratched at the thick of his dark beard.

“But the song grows weak during long and languid seasons. It is not actually the song that we try to keep going. That will live on with little maintenance. Instead, we must keep the spirit of the song alive. For once you have lost your spirit, there will be little reason for the song to sing. It may continue a melody, it may even march for a short time, but such strained music! You must look after your spirit. It is the spirit of the song that must continue in your chest and in your head. Are we clear?”

“Uh, yes sir, thank you,” Rob said after a pause.

“Good. Now I want you to take some men into the wildwood and cut down some old trees. The church is beginning to fall apart and we cannot have our god trapped in a small, sagging building. We will begin building a new place of worship north of here so it will sit in the light of the sun most of the year.” The chief looked down into his tea.

“Yes sir. Thank you for your time,” Rob said.

“It is something I’m happy to share with you.”

Rob and the men he had gathered found some large trees to the east of the settlement where the migration trails of the deer and coyote crossed as they emerged from the deep forest on their way to the river. The tall, sweet birch trees that Rob found grew where the river used to run, hundreds and hundreds of years ago. They grew slow and straight and strong.

After peeling bark off several trees with the tips of his fingers and smelling it, Rob looked back to the men who stood waiting.

“Let’s start with this one,” he called as he leaned against the thick tree.

Darren's boy lifted his ax and began hacking at the base of the tree. Soft, sharp thuds sent yellow-white pieces of the tree's flesh into the air. Another man joined in the fight. Thump, thump. Thump, thump. The axes fell in a rhythm. The delayed message of the attack was sent to the top of the tree which shook softly – the journey of blood through veins.

"It's goin' east!" Rob yelled as he saw the top of the tree lean.

The men stepped back and looked up. Muffled cracks and breaks spread from tree base to tree top, through knots, branches and leaves. The tree fell slowly with force and crushed a smaller birch tree on its way to the ground.

Darren's boy fell to the ground an instant after the tree, echoing the tree's crash. He stretched out his neck as if he could escape the pain of death, or death itself, with one last movement. But he was gone. His body lay parallel to the tree – his head facing east, his feet west.

Rob yelled. Maybe more out of surprise than sadness. The still body was quickly surrounded by the men. Rob leaned over Darren's son. For the second time in two days he checked a body for a heartbeat. He stood up, cursed and took a few steps back.

"Did anyone see anything?" Rob asked. "Anyone?!" For minutes, there was only stunned silence.

"Well, boss...we all...we all seen the same thing, I think. That tree fell, then he fell. Nothin' hit him, he just fell when the tree did." The man looked around to see if someone was going to challenge what he had witnessed.

Rob scratched at his beard, then at the back of his head. He looked back toward the settlement, to the body of his friend on the ground when something caught his eye. Dark red sap ran from the base of the tree they had just cut down. He walked to the tree. The sun shone through clouds, and the thin, soft breeze made leaves move high up in the trees.

He knelt down and stuck his finger in the bright, black sap.

"Come over here, guys," Rob said. The men gathered around the tree. Rob held his finger up to his nose, examining it closely. "There's something wrong with this sap. It isn't normal. It's...it's...I think it's blood," Rob said.

"Come on," Daniel's son, Jim, said. "It's not blood. Maybe the tree had a disease. Maybe the sap just thinned out."

"You ever seen a tree have a disease like that?" Rob asked.

"Well, no, but..."

"No you haven't. None of us have. Look at this tree. It's as healthy as they come," Rob said.

Jim knelt down next to Rob and dipped his finger in the puddle at the base of the tree. It continued seeping up through the base of the tree as if the heart of the tree was still slowly beating somewhere beneath the cool ground.

Jim stood and walked over to Darren's son's body. He carefully rolled the body onto its side and stuck another finger in the puddle of blood that was being absorbed into the soft dirt. All of the men watched.

"Shit, you're right, Rob," Jim said. "I think this is the same stuff. That tree is bleeding."

Two men stayed behind to watch over the body while the rest of the group returned to the settlement. Few words were exchanged.

When the men returned to the settlement, they were told that a mother of five had died while they were in the forest. She died the same as the others. Quickly, quietly. The chief ordered a ceremony for that night.

“We must offer a spirit sacrifice. We must find out if we have angered the spirit of the land or if we are being warned,” the chief told Rob.

“Which spirit will we sacrifice?”

“We will offer a spirit of speed, because we must know the answer soon. We must offer a spirit of intelligence, because what we seek right now is wisdom. We must offer a spirit of friendship, because we seek to continue our relationship with this land. We will sacrifice the best dog we have,” he told Rob.

That night while the settlers gathered around a large pile of dried logs, three boys carried the strongest male dog to the chief who stood waiting, praying. The dog seemed to sense the energy from the mass of swaying settlers. The boys flipped the dog over and held it upside down in front of the chief. The chief laid his hand on the dog’s chest.

“God of this land, god of these people, we offer this spirit sacrifice to you. We seek brotherhood with this land, and we desire wisdom. Please accept this, the best we can give you, and make clear what is not yet understood. After this fire has burned for six days and nights, we shall know the truth,” the chief said as he motioned for Rob. Rob walked up to the chief and picked up a wooden bucket that sat on the ground. He held it under the dog’s head. The boys flipped the dog back over, the chief grabbed a knife from Rob and placed a hand in between the dog’s ears. The dog stopped resisting; the message had been passed. The chief held the knife to the dog’s throat and quickly slit its throat. The initial burst of blood missed the wooden bucket, but the flow quickly slowed. Rob caught the rest of the blood in the bucket and handed it to the chief.

The boys threw the dog’s motionless body onto the large pile of dry logs. The chief said something no one heard and lit the pile of logs. The fire lit the sky. The people formed a line and waited to be blessed. The oldest lined up first and approached the chief who held the blood-filled bucket. He sprinkled drops of blood onto the fire for each settler then held the bucket out to Rob. Rob smeared a line of blood down both cheeks of the men with his thumbs. He smeared a line down the left cheek of each woman and child. That night there was much singing and dancing and drinking. Some of the women started to cry but stopped themselves for fear their tears would wash away the blood.

Rob woke up on the ground the next morning, the low-lying smoke from the night still rolled over his body. His eyes watered, and his head was filled with pressure. He forced a yawn. Small boys ran through the compound chasing chickens and laughing – the blood almost completely worn off their cheeks. Rob pushed himself up off the ground, stretched to the sky and rolled his neck. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Follow me,” the chief said.

Rob followed silently.

“Thank you for your help last night, but we are no closer to an answer,” the chief said.

“What do you mean?”

“There was another death this morning. Jacob’s wife. I don’t know what’s happening. I talked to Chief Keeowa, and he knows nothing of this.”

“What will we do?”

“We... We have always lived within this tension. This struggle between nature and purity. Nature purifies us in a way nothing else can. It brings us back to where we should be, where we came from. It drives out the distractions, the wickedness. But this process can pollute nature. All the evil is flushed out of us and into this ground, this air. Maybe we are now losing the struggle. I am no longer sure if the land can heal us. If this land is sick, our children become ill. If this land is sad, we will not eat. If this land is mourning, we cannot thrive. If this land is not cherished, our people will no longer cherish one another.” The chief looked up to Rob. “Please tell the people what has happened. I will decide what we will do next.”

Rob had only told a few settlers that there was another death when three young boys ran through the compound telling everyone the chief was getting ready to address his people. The people quickly moved to the center of the village. A breeze entered the settlement from the west, pushed down from the large mountains and pulled out over the prairie.

The chief walked out of his hut and did not wave or smile at the people as he typically did. It seemed nothing of his old self remained; he was flesh and blood and bone, but little else. He did not look at his people. He walked to the large, smooth stone that he stood on when he addressed his people. A young boy stood next to the stone, and the chief pushed off the boy’s shoulder and climbed to the top. There was still a hint of blood from the night before smeared on his cheeks.

“There has been another death this morning. Same circumstances as the others,” the chief paused. The people drew in a deep breath as one body.

One of the elders near the front spoke up. “What do you propose we do? Have we not pleased the spirit with our sacrifice?”

The chief looked up and opened his mouth, but a gust of wind blew through the settlement and, with it, took his breath. The chief fell slow and rigid off the large, smooth stone to the ground with a solid thud. Blood poured from his body. The people screamed and pulled back. Rob ran up to the chief, but the old man’s soul was already gone.

That night, some of the elders found a letter in the chief’s house. The chief had planned for the possibility of his death. The letter insisted that Rob take over if the chief died. Rob was reluctant; he was young. But youth meant strength. He could be brash and confident in a way that defied circumstances and evidence and truth. The elders agreed with the wishes of the chief, and a short, private ceremony was held instilling Rob with power and privilege.

Fear filled Rob like the fullness of night descending on dusk. His world was now too dark to see. He would try to adapt, to conquer and quench the new fear, but he knew somewhere deep within – where the soul’s voice is heard and felt – that he was not a leader.

After the ceremony, Rob knocked on Mattie’s door. It took her a minute to open it.

“Hi, Rob. How are you?” It was clear she had been crying. The whole settlement had been crying.

“I’m alright. I just can’t...I...I feel lost,” Rob said. Mattie pulled him inside the small hut and gave him a hug. He looked down at her, “How are you?”

“I’m doing alright,” she said. “I miss the chief already.”

“Yeah. I wish...I wish things were different.”

“There’s nothing we can do about the chief now. But he chose you. You can lead these people,” she said.

“How do you know?”

“Everyone knows, Rob. They always knew.”

“It doesn’t make sense. I’m just afraid they won’t let me lead. I’m afraid they’ll panic. I’m afraid I’ll panic,” he said.

“You’re not capable of panicking.”

“I wish that were true. I think if the people just stay busy, they won’t have time to panic. They’ll worry, but hopefully they won’t go crazy.”

“They won’t go crazy. I know you won’t let them,” she said.

Rob smiled a small smile and put his hand on top of hers. She didn’t pull back. Instead, she looked up at him. He moved in and kissed the softness of her lower lip. Mattie closed her eyes tight and pulled her hand back.

“Rob, there’s something I need to tell you.”

Rob straightened up.

“Jules, she...well, Jules loved you.” Mattie looked at Rob’s eyes which were now closed. “She *really* loved you.”

Rob moved to the door without a sound, without looking back at Mattie, and walked out of the hut.

The next morning, Rob called everyone to a meeting. He rubbed his hands together, then climbed up onto the large stone where the chief was last seen alive.

“These have been hard days. They have been hard for us all, but I want you to know that I take this new responsibility with hope and strength and reverence.” Rob looked up at the many faces and addressed his people: “Please go out into the wildwood today. Walk through the trees, rest in the comfort of the shade. Focus on the land. Meditate. Seek answers. We are a community, and this is where we rest. Tonight we will come together and share what has been revealed.” Rob climbed down off the large stone. He was surrounded by thin smiles and sad eyes.

Rob walked through the silence of the wood’s stillness for most of the day. The thick air was heavy and hard to push through. He focused on the sounds of the forest, the breeze in the trees. He studied the way the sunlight fell in pieces through the branches and rested unevenly on the ground. He heard the deer’s hooves thumping on the soft, warm ground. It was the beating heart of earth, itself.

Branches moved up and down with the wind. Birds called to one another from top of tree to top of tree. The last of the afternoon clouds blew west over the ridge, chasing the sun.

Mattie found Rob in the woods and quietly, cautiously approached, almost as if by mistake.

“Oh, Rob. Hi. I’m so sorry about yesterday,” she said when she was sure her presence was felt.

“Hi, Mattie.” He hardly looked up at her. His eyes were sunken in – the weight of sleeplessness had loosened his skin. “That’s okay. It’s not your fault.”

They walked slowly, weaving between trees.

“What has been revealed to you so far?” Mattie asked.

“Well, I found a tree that fell down by the old storehouse,” He said.

“Yeah, it’s been windy lately. Must’ve blown over,” Mattie said.

“There was the same blood-like sap coming out of it that we found when the other tree blew over. The day Darren’s boy died. It was dark and flowing up out of the base of the tree, like out of a body.”

“What do mean? Do you think there’s a connection?” Mattie asked.

Rob was silent for a moment, then he looked up, his eyes opening wider.

“Of course! Mattie, that’s it! We’re connected!” Rob said as he stopped walking. He looked into Mattie’s eyes. Maybe for comfort, maybe for affirmation. The thought had been swimming around his mind for days, but he had not been able to grasp it or name it.

“Who’s connected?” Mattie asked.

“We are! Us and the trees. A tree falls every time one of us dies. One of us dies every time a tree falls!” Rob was panting now.

Mattie softly rubbed Rob’s arm.

“Rob, you figured it out!” There was new hope, but she still spoke these words with sadness. “Let’s figure out a plan. We know what’s happening now. You can figure out a solution,” Mattie said.

“Geez, I don’t know,” Rob said. He wasn’t sure he could figure it out, but he looked up and saw Mattie looking at him. “Okay, okay. When a tree falls down, a settler dies. We must keep the trees from falling.”

He realized the absurdity as he said this. How can man come up against nature and hope to win? These trees do not decide when to fall. They are pushed and pulled to the ground. It is the earth, the sky, the wind and water that knock these trees down. It is either an attack on the settlement or a warning to the settlers that another cycle is beginning. Maybe we will not be around to see the end of this new cycle. He looked up. “Maybe we get the men to take all the rope from the compound and begin tying the trees together. It will keep them busy. It should hold up the smaller trees, at least.”

But a plan to keep the people busy was not enough. He must protect the people. He must survive. It was a base and animalistic desire. It ran through him; it defined him. Yes, survival was all that was left.

Rob looked over and saw Mattie’s silhouette in the gray-green light of dusk. The two figures flitted through the thick air toward the settlement. Mattie grabbed Rob’s arm. She felt safe fingering his muscles. Rob looked over at her, tripped, and fell toward the ground. Mattie heard the cracking grains of wood, splitting and shrinking, shifting and shaking.

Rob heard it too. Trees closed in around him, the ground began to sway and shake. The sky fell and pinned him to the ground, and he began to feel like a small speck in the distant, clouded sky. His mind accelerated, but he could think of nothing. He could not think of one thing. The soul had left its place in his body, but it was still trying



to escape through the cage of his ribs. Time stopped. Not even his soul yet knew if it would rise with the shining light of freedom and innocence or sink with the dark weight of ash and damnation.

There was no one left to look to, so Mattie looked to herself. She looked deep into the places a person tries to conceal. Death had surrounded her showing itself on all sides. It reached into the deep parts of her heart and took all that could be found. Now the threat of death hung quietly in the sky above her. There was little left to hope for. The chief's death was crushing. He had been – since she was born, since she could remember – the one who kept the people moving forward. He was the weighted layer a father gives his children. Strong and warm and wise. But Rob's death dug to the depths. Rob had been the new hope, the last hope. He represented the possibilities of life and love. She could find no small piece of hope within her heart to tell the other settlers that Rob was gone. With him gone, the hope, too, had disappeared. She could not tell them what happened, but she knew what to do. She didn't have to think about it. It was as if she was born with the knowledge of what to do next. She had carried this idea from the earliest days of her life.

Mattie walked quietly through the forest. She did not take a direct path, but she arrived at the edge of the settlement where the sacrificial fire still burned. She looked around and saw no one. She ran out of the darkness, her hands and face and eyes lit by the jagged flames. She grabbed two large, burning sticks from the fire and returned to the gray-black of the deep woods.

First smoke, then flames, rose above the tree line. The fire was crowning, jumping from tree top to tree top. The blaze burned hot, and the air caught fire, choked in oranges and reds. Steady winds blew smoke and flames through the warm night into the calm and quiet morning. Gray and white ash fell so thick that arms and legs and branches and roots could not be distinguished from one another. Everything rested silently on the ground entwined, entangled, and smoldering.