

Chapter Readings

THE FIRE

MIIG EXPLAINED IT one night at the fire.

"Dreams get caught in the webs woven in your bones. That's where they live, in that marrow there." He poked at the crackling wood with a pointy stick till the shadows were frenetic against his tan face, till they slid into the longer shoots of hair near the front of his mohawk, the tendrils he swept up and patted into place atop the shorter brush with the care of a pageant queen. He didn't make eye contact with us, the motley group seated in a loose semicircle around the fire, beneath the trees where he commanded place.

I imagined spiderwebs in my bones and turned my palm towards the moon, watching the ballet of bones between my elbow and wrist twist to make it so. I saw webs clotted with dreams like fat flies. I wondered if the horses I'd ridden into this dawn were still caught in there like bugs, whinnying at the shift.

Miig nudged the rounded stones placed around the perimeter of the fire with his boot. You could see where the holes in his sole had been patched up with sap and scavenged leather.

"How do they get in there?" RiRi, now seven, was always curious and not shy with her questions.

"You are born with them. Your DNA weaves them into the marrow like spinners," Miig answered. The flames tried to settle, and he prodded them to dance again. He added, "That's where they pluck them from."

I pulled each one of my fingers into my palm and made a fist silhouetted against the fire, flames licking around the tight ball of brown and bone. I imagined my brother tied to a chair at the school, a flock of grey-hooded villains tightening his beaded chains while they recited Hail Mary like synchronized swimmers.

Miig sat, satisfied that we were all at attention, that we were listening with every cell. He leaned against a felled tree beside Minerva, who woke

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up with his rustling. He rolled a smoke out of his precious tobacco stores and plucked a twig out of the fire with a burning ember at the tip to light it with. Old Minerva, nearsighted to squinting, lifted her nose at the smell. Her lips fell slack and she sighed. Those first few exhales were big and wasteful as Miig tried to get the damp paper to light, and smoke billowed across the clearing like messages. Everything was always damp, so we were trained to sniff out mould to keep that sickness at bay. Minerva made her hands into shallow cups and pulled the air over her head and face, making prayers out of ashes and smoke. Real old-timey, that Minerva.

Miig and Minerva were the only grown-ups in our group. Miig wore his hair shaved to the skull except down the middle and had a moustache that only grew on the left side of his top lip. He was tall but bent like a walking question mark, and he was short with words and patience. Miig wore army pants, alternating between two identical pairs, and layers of brown and green sweaters. He kept a small pouch hung on a shoelace around his neck and tucked into those sweaters. Once, when I'd asked him, he'd told me that was where he kept his heart, because it was too dangerous to keep it in his chest, what with the sharp edges of bones so easily broken. I never asked again. Too many metaphors and stories wrapped in stories. It could be exhausting, talking to Miig.

Minerva was dark, round, and tiny like a tree stump. She kept her long grey hair in two braids like a little girl with a flowered kerchief tied over her head and under her round chin. She had old-timey ways, but you couldn't get much from her, either. She didn't talk, and when she did it was in bursts accompanied by laughter and maybe a scream or two.

Mostly she watched ... everything: us kids playing in the river, the way the trees tilted to the north towards what was left of the natural landscape beyond the clear-cuts stripped of topsoil. She watched the birds on their perpetual migration to anywhere, the fire at end of day, and the way we clapped each other's backs when trading off on the traplines.

There were seven of us in the group: five boys and two girls, not including the Elders. Not one of us was related by blood, which was a

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good thing for those closer in age, since, in the old days when our families were huge and sprawling, accidentally dating a second or third cousin had meant you had ask about genealogy right off the bat. But it was also lonely, not having the common connection of grandparents or aunties like we used to have so often. There was Chi-Boy, who at seventeen was the oldest boy and taller than anyone else. He was quiet almost to the point of being mute and as skinny as a doe. He never seemed to sleep as long as the rest of us or need as much food, and he stuck close to Miig so that when he was needed he was no more than one syllable away. He came from the west, from the Cree lands.

After Chi-Boy there was me, sixteen. I was nicknamed Frenchie as much for my name as for my people - the Metis. I came from a long line of hunters, trappers, and voyageurs. But now, with most of the rivers cut into pieces and lakes left as grey sludge puckers on the landscape, my own history seemed like a myth along the lines of dragons. Compared to Chi-Boy's six-plus feet, I wasn't the tallest, but I did have the longest hair of any of the boys, almost to my waist, burnt ombre at the untrimmed edges. I braided it myself each morning, to keep it out of the way and to remind myself of things I couldn't quite remember but that, nevertheless,

I knew to be true. My clothes were also burnt from the sun and wear, a mottled brown from their original tones of black.

Then there were the twelve-year-old twins, Tree and Zheegwon, whose matched green eyes communicated without words between them. They were broader than the rest of us, with wide shoulders and heavy hands that hung from ropey arms. They were dotted with scars I couldn't bring myself to ask about. They shared one baseball cap between the two of them, changing it from head to head, one day to the next.

Slopper was next, the nine-year-old with the belly of a fifty-year-old diabetic. His family came from the East Coast.

The girls had Wab, who at eighteen was practically a woman. She had a vicious keloid slash that split her face nearly in two. Then there was RiRi, who came from a Metis community close to where my father had said ours used to be, who was old enough to piss in the bush and swear

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when we played Red Ass on abandoned brick walls, but who was still a child.

Us kids, we longed for the old-timey. We wore our hair in braids to show it. We made sweat lodges out of broken branches dug back into the earth, covered over with our shirts tied together at the buttonholes. Those lodges weren't very hot, but we sat in them for hours and willed the sweat to pop over our willowy arms and hairless cheeks.

"It's time for Story." Miig exhaled smoke as he spoke. I watched the word STORY puff over the fire and spread into a cumulative haze that smelled of ground roots and acrid burn just above our dark heads.

Slopper struggled to his feet and started over to his tent. The youngest weren't privy to Story, not yet anyway. RiRi made the face she pulled out when she wanted something, like an extra piece of camp bread or to sleep in my tent so I could tell her stories to keep the nightmares away. Miig just looked at her, lifting one eyebrow higher than the other. "Aww, Miig. Can't I stay for a little bit?"

She received no answer, and kicked rocks all the way to her tent. The woods grew quiet now; even the beetles stopped rubbing their smooth shells on softened bark, even the wind picked around the branches instead of rattling straight through.

Miig leaned in so that the fire illuminated his face from the bottom like unsteady stage lights. And he opened a hand, palm down to indicate the ground, this ground, as he began Story.

STORY: PART ONE

"ANISHNAABE PEOPLE, US, lived on these lands for a thousand years. Some of our brothers decided to walk as far east as they could go, and some walked west, and some crossed great stretches of narrow earth until they reached other parts of the globe. Many of us stayed here. We welcomed visitors, who renamed the land Canada. Sometimes things got real between us and the newcomers. Sometimes we killed each other. We

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were great fighters - warriors, we called ourselves and each other and we knew these lands, so we kicked a lot of ass.”

The boys always puffed out their chests when Miig got to this part. The women straightened their spines and elongated their necks, their beautiful faces like flowers opening in the heat of the fire.

“But we lost a lot. Mostly because we got sick with new germs. And then when we were on our knees with fever and puked, they decided they liked us there, on our knees. And that’s when they opened the first schools.

“We suffered there. We almost lost our languages. Many lost their innocence, their laughter, their lives. But we got through it, and the schools were shut down. We returned to our home places and rebuilt, relearned, regrouped. We picked up and carried on. There were a lot of years where we were lost, too much pain drowned in forgetting that came in convenient packages: bottles, pills, cubicles where we settled to move around papers. But we sang our songs and brought them to the streets and into the classrooms - classrooms we built on our own lands and filled with our own words and books. And once we remembered that we were warriors, once we honored the pain and left it on the side of the road, we moved ahead. We were back.”

Minerva drew in a big, wet sniff, wiped her nose across her sleeve, and then set about chewing the fabric once more.

“Then the wars for the water came. America reached up and started sipping on our lakes with a great metal straw. And where were the freshest lakes and the cleanest rivers? On our lands, of course. Anishnaabe were always the canary in the mine for the rest of them. Too bad the country was busy worrying about how we didn’t pay an extra tax on Levi’s jeans and Kit Kat bars to listen to what we were shouting. “The Great Lakes were polluted to muck. It took some doing, but right around the time California was swallowed back by the ocean, they were fenced off, too poisonous for use.”

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I'd seen the Great Lakes: Ontario when we were in the city and Huron when we lived on the New Road Allowance. The waters were grey and thick like porridge. In the distance, anchored ships swung, silent and shuttered, back and forth on the roll of methodical waves.

"The Water Wars raged on, moving north seeking our rivers and bays, and eventually, once our homelands were decimated and the water leeches and the people scattered, they moved on to the towns. Only then were armies formed, soldiers drafted, and bullets fired. Ironically, at the same time rivers were being sucked south and then east to the highest bidder, the North was melting. The Melt put most of the northlands under water, and the people moved south or onto some of the thousands of tiny islands that popped up out of the Melt's wake across the top of our lands. Those northern people, they were tough, though, some of the toughest we've ever had, so they were okay, are still okay, the tales tell. Some better than okay. That's why we move north towards them now."

Miig stood, pacing his Story pace, waving his arms like a slow-motion conductor to place emphasis and tone over us all. We needed to remember Story. It was his job to set the memory in perpetuity. He spoke to us every week. Sometimes Story was focused on one area, like the first residential schools: where they were, what happened there, when they closed. Other times he told a hundred years in one long narrative, blunt and without detail. Sometimes we gathered for an hour so he could explain treaties, and others it was ten minutes to list the earthquakes in the sequence that they occurred, peeling the edging off the continents back like diseased gums. But every week we spoke, because it was imperative that we know. He said it was the only way to make the kinds of changes that were necessary to really survive. "A general has to see the whole field to make good strategy," he'd explain. "When you're down there fighting, you can't see much past the threat directly in front of you."

"The Water Wars lasted ten years before a new set of treaties and agreements were shook on between world leaders in echoing assembly halls. The Anishnaabe were scattered, lonely, and scared. On our knees again, only this time there was no home to regroup at. Meanwhile, the rest of the continent sank into a new era. The world's edges had been

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clipped by the rising waters, tectonic shifts, and constant rains. Half the population was lost in the disaster and from the disease that spread from too many corpses and not enough graves. The ones that were left were no better off, really. They worked longer hours, they stopped reproducing without the doctors, and worst of all, they stopped dreaming. Families, loved ones, were torn apart in this new world."

He stopped suddenly, the fire bouncing over the planes of his face, something so sad it hurt to look in his eyes. And then the rain started again. He couldn't continue. Couldn't walk us into the darker parts of Story, not now.

"Enough for tonight, then."

We packed up what lay about while the fire still burned. Carrying the tarp we used as a dining room table over to the tents, I heard her call. "French?"

I sighed and dropped my shoulders, still smiling. "Yeah, Ri?"
"Can't sleep."

This was fast becoming the routine. I heard Story, she did not. So she would ask me to tell her stories, innocently enough, but desperate for some understanding, the understanding that was withheld from her youth so that she could form into a real human before she understood that some saw her as little more than a crop.

"Be there in a minute."
"kay."

I pegged the tarp between RiRi's and Minerva's tents so that they'd have a little covered walkway should they have to use the washroom during the rainy night. I carried over the cleaned latrine bucket and a smaller bucket half filled with water for washing up. Then I took my boots off at the door and joined RiRi in her tent. Until last month she'd shared a tent with Minerva. But she was getting older and had demanded some space, which was granted. We encouraged independence in our family. We never knew when anyone would be on their own, even at seven.

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The tent was small, and the firelight from outside made everything the same red as the vinyl walls. She had made a nest of her blankets in the middle on top of her blue ground tarp, away from the walls that could hold condensation and spread dampness in a good enough downpour. I lay down beside her on top of the blankets. Her pillow was like all of ours, a case stuffed with folded clothes. There was no room for extras in the camp; everything did double duty.

Before I'd even laid my head down, she was after Story.

"Tell me what happened, French. Please."

"Ri, you know I can't tell you."

"But why? Why can't I know?" She lifted herself up on an elbow, pleading. "It's no fair. I get sent away all the time!"

I rolled over onto my back, reaching up to tap the raggedy dream catcher I'd bent out of branches and filled with vines for her so that it swung on its string. "It's for your own good."

She squinted at me in the red gloom. "That's a load of bull. I deserve to know my own history."

It was getting more difficult to reason with her, especially when she made sense. RiRi had been just a baby when I'd joined the camp, newly walking and bucket trained. For some reason she quickly grew attached to me. Miig thought I must have reminded her of someone from her original family. Whatever the reason, I often had a chubby shadow throughout my day. Now that she was a real kid with her own duties and her own mind, it was becoming increasingly hard to relegate her to the shadows and to ignore her requests for information, for background to her difficult life.

"Ri, Slopper was allowed to hear Story when he was younger," I began.

"What?! That's no fair!" She was up on her knees in a flash. "How come he got to hear?"

"Relax, relax." I pushed her shoulder, trying to get her to lie down.

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"Listen to me, please."

I stopped talking until she grudgingly lay back on her side, facing me. "Slopper was allowed to hear Story a couple years ago, when he was your age. He didn't even hear it all, and it didn't turn out so well."

"But I'm not Slopper, French." She had sprung back up. "I can handle it. I'm mature for my age."

I laughed at this. "I know that's true, Ri. You're practically a grown-ass lady."

She pursed her lips, checking my face for mockery. When she found none, she gave me a stiff, "Thank you."

"But it's about timing. Miig will let you know the whole story when it's time. Slopper was pretty messed up for months after. He stopped playing, didn't want to learn anything, and even stopped sleeping so good."

She was finally quiet.

I watched the dream catcher spin to a stop. I remembered following Mitch around, bugging him for any details he might know as we tromped after my parents to the Bay. I thought about the parts Miig had left out tonight, the parts that kept us running. Even still, it was unfair to keep everything from Ri. It had driven me to distraction to not know, made it harder to keep moving day after day without understanding what was on our heels.

"Maybe ... yeah, I think maybe I can share some things, though."

Her eyes grew big, but she held back her words.

"Years ago people, other people, not us, they kinda got sick. Really the whole world itself got sick." I tiptoed around the harsher images that came to mind. "Like, it never used to rain all the time. And there were way more people."

"After the rains started and the lands shifted so that some cities fell

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right into the oceans, people had to move around. Diseases spread like crazy. With all this sickness and movement and death, people got sad. One of the ways the sadness came out was when they slept. They stopped being able to dream. At first they just talked about it all casual-like. 'Oh, funniest thing, I haven't dreamed in months.' 'Isn't that odd, I haven't dreamed either.'

Here I pitched my voice high and wiggled my shoulder to imitate a mincing kind of movement, like how I imagined white ladies did as they pushed metal carts down long straight aisles to gather food from boxes lined up on shelves, all of it already dead. RiRi smiled at this impression.

"They visited their head doctors - psychiatrists - and they took pills to help them sleep when they stopped having the will to lie down at night. Soon they turned on each other, and the world changed again."

A low whistle with a fluttering end sounded outside. The alarm. I jumped up.

"Where are you going?" RiRi sounded frantic. She'd just started to hear Story and now I was leaving.

"Gotta go. Something is coming." I dashed out of the tent, stepping into my boots with the laces still undone.

The rest of the group, with the exception of Slopper, was around the low fire.

Miig acknowledged me with a look and then sought out Chi-Boy with his eyes. He motioned with his head to the east of our site, keeping in a crouch and hurrying to the trees. We were out in the open, it was too late to run or hide, we'd have to fight. Chi-Boy pulled his long blade out from the sheath where it hung at his belt and backed into the trees until the shadows covered him completely. I needed to help. I grabbed a long stick from the fire, its end glowing with orange heat scales, and waited. My hands shook so the stick clattered a bit against the rock perimeter of the fire. Wab had crept over to crouch in front of Minerva. She nodded at me, and I scanned the forest behind them. Sweat dripped down the bridge of

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my nose. I blinked as if that would relieve its slow, maddening itch. Then I heard it.

Footsteps in the bush. Not heavy steps, light and cautious. Just like a Recruiter on the prowl. I raised the stick behind me like a bat, pulling it up and over like a sword. I could hear the sizzle of the lit tip by my ear.

Closer.

I swallowed hard and almost coughed, catching it at the last minute so that my eyes teared over. I heard Miig owl call to Chi-Boy, who answered with deep silence.

Closer.

The steps were slow but steady. I picked up the swoosh of a drag, like a bag or maybe a body. Maybe we weren't the first camp to be discovered. I could swear I saw the branches move in the trees, just past the second row beyond our clearing.

"Come on, goof. Come and get it," I whispered, tossing my weight between the balls of my feet, trying to be brave.

Closer.

Now I saw Miig, sidestepping between the first and second rows, his feet silent in their patched-up shoes. Why was he out in the open like that? Maybe he was playing decoy? Should I start rounding up the others to run? My breathing got louder, and the footsteps stopped.

Shit! Could they hear my fear? Did I give us away?

"What the hell ?! " A high-pitched yell and then, two seconds later, Chi-Boy emerged, dangling a girl by her forearm from his height.

"Let go of me!"

She was spinning and kicking and I'm pretty sure spitting. Chi-Boy pulled her out of the shadows and dropped her in front of the fire, a foot from where I stood with the dry stick raised behind my head. Miig

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emerged next with a large green duffel bag.

"Jesus holy God! You scared me!" She was angry. Her eyes swung around the circle, taking in the fire, the tents, and the people. Then she found me.

"And what in the hell are you doing, posing for a goddamn Hall of Fame statue?" She rubbed her arm where Chi-Boy had held her. Miig carefully put her bag by her feet and took a few steps back. I lowered my stick and speared the ground over and over.

"Some welcome." She glared at us.

When I lost enough adrenaline to notice the way her cheeks held shadows but her eyes were clear, one thought jumped into my head. PLEASE DON'T LET HER BE MY COUSIN. PLEASE ...