

Part 2 Readings

STORY: PART 2

THIS TIME MIIGWANS picked up where he'd left off the night that Rose first arrived.

"THE EARTH WAS broken. Too much taking for too damn long, so she finally broke. But she went out like a wild horse, bucking off as much as she could before lying down. A melting North meant the water levels rose and the weather changed. It changed to violence in some cases, building tsunamis, spinning tornados, crumbling earthquakes, and the shapes of countries were changed forever, whole coasts breaking off like crust.

"And all those pipelines in the ground? They snapped like icicles and spewed bile over forests, into lakes, drowning whole reserves and towns. So much laid to waste from the miscalculation of infallibility in the face of a planet's revolt.

"People died in the millions when that happened. The ones that were left had to migrate inward. It was like the second coming of the boats, so many sick people and not enough time to organize peacefully.

"But the powers that be still refused to change and bent the already stooped under the whips of a schedule made for a population twice its size and inflated by the need to rebuild. Those that were left worked longer, worked harder. And now the sun was gone for weeks at a time. The suburban structure of their lives had been upended. And so they got sicker, this time in the head. They stopped dreaming. And a man without dreams is just a meaty machine with a broken gauge.

"People lost their minds, killing themselves and others and, even worse for the new order, refusing to work at all. They needed answers, solutions. So, up here, the Governors turned to the Church and the scientists to find a cure for the missing dreams. In the meantime, those who could afford it turned to sleep counselors, took pills to go to bed and pills to wake up, and did things like group hypnosis to implant new dreams.

"At first, people turned to Indigenous people the way the New Agers had, all reverence and curiosity, looking for ways we could help guide them. They asked to come to ceremony. They humbled themselves when

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we refused. And then they changed on us, like the New Agers, looking for ways they could take what we had and administer it themselves. How could they best appropriate the uncanny ability we kept to dream? How could they make ceremony better, more efficient, more economical?

“That was the first alarm set off in the communities. We thought that was the worst of it. If only.

“We were moved off lands that were deemed ‘necessary’ to that government, same way they took reserve land during wartime. Because no one cared about long-range things like courting votes for the next election and instead cared about things like keeping valued, wealthy community members safe; there were no negotiations. We were just pushed off. The new migration from the coastlines was changing geography daily.

“And then, even after our way of life was being commoditized, after our lands were filled with water companies and wealthy corporate investors, we were still hopeful. Because we had each other. New communities started to form, and we were gathering strength. But then the Church and the scientists that were working day and night on the dream problem came up with their solution and everything went to hell.

“They asked for volunteers first. Put out ads asking for people with ‘Indigenous bloodlines and good general health’ to check in with local clinics for medical trials. They’d give you room and board for a week and a small honorarium to pay for your time off work. By then our distrust had grown stronger, and they didn’t get many volunteers from the public.

So they turned to the prisons. The prisons were always full of our people.

Whether or not the prisoners went voluntarily, who knows? There weren’t enough people worried about the well-being of prisoners to really make sure.

“It began as a rumor, that they had found a way to siphon the dreams right out of our bones, a rumor whispered every time one of us went missing, a rumor denounced every time their doctors sent us to hospitals and treatments centers never to return. They kept sending us away,

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enticing us to seek medical care and then keeping us locked up, figuring out ways to hone and perfect their 'solution' for sale.

"Soon, they needed too many bodies, and they turned to history to show them how to best keep us warehoused, how to best position the culling. That's when the new residential schools started growing up from the dirt like poisonous brick mushrooms.

"We go to the schools and they leach the dreams from where our ancestors hid them, in the honeycombs of slushy marrow buried in our bones. And us? Well, we join our ancestors, hoping we left enough dreams behind for the next generation to stumble across."

THE WAY IT ALL CHANGED

WE SET UP our tents in a semicircle, backing onto the woods, midway between their fire and the cliff. Miig didn't want to stay close, nor did he want to be backed up onto an impossible exit.

We built our own fire and unfurled blankets. Light rain fell for about an hour as the sun was setting so we roped up our tarps and sat together for a moment, to regroup and plan watch.

"We'll do hour shifts and leave at first light. Starting with Tree and ending with French. Got it?"

No one was sure later who was to blame that we were caught unaware, but then, the idea of blaming someone was too horrible to imagine. It would have killed us even more, and we were already so diminished. I heard her at the same time I felt a body crash into the side of the tent, full weight hard on my back while I lay, still clothed, in my sleeping bag. The body gave a sound like a kitten squeezed too tight, a kind of windless yelp. The sound pushed adrenaline into my thighs and knocked sleep out of my head. I struggled under the weight and whoever it was rolled off, cursing.

I heard another yelp and then a screech, a long wail that made my teeth chatter. It was Wab.

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“What the hell?” I pushed to my knees and unzipped the tent flap. I turned once to see Slopper, eyes wide, blankets tucked around his face like a giant baby. I saw in his eyes the reflection of the Morse code my heart was pushing out: terror.

About twenty feet off, Tree and Zheegwon were back to back, arms intertwined, at the end of a gun held by Travis. Miigwans was a few steps to their right, his own gun on the ground by his feet, chest heaving. I couldn't see Minerva or Rose, but Chi-Boy lay on the ground, his own knife pushed through his arm. Wab was still screaming, standing in front of her tent in her long underwear, mouth open in a round O of panic. At first I thought she must be screaming over Chi-Boy's wound, but then I followed her stare. Lincoln, having picked himself up from where he'd fallen into my tent, had lumbered over behind Travis. His hair was messy on top and his face looked dozy, like a sleepy child. He was swaying a bit.

I thought it was maybe drink, or whatever he'd been swallowing back at the campfire, that was making him move that way. But then he turned and I saw RiRi, her throat grasped under his thick arm, legs kicking the air. She was grabbing at his forearm with her little hands, her face bright red.

“Just put her down.” Miig tried to keep his voice steady. “Please, just put the girl on the ground so she can breathe.”

Travis licked his lips, shifting his weight between the balls of his feet. He tried keeping his eyes pinned on the twins, Miig, and Wab while he backed up.

“Linc,” he called to his partner over his shoulder. “Linc, the girl is no good dead. For Chrissakes, man, make sure she's breathin'.”

“Put her down!” Miig yelled now, pointing, an edge of panic in his voice.

“Easy, Chief. Easy.” Travis trained his handgun on Miig and moved forward quickly to kick the hunting rifle away from reach and just into the shadows at the edge of the woods.

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Then he turned, "Lincoln, for fucksakes, put her down!"

The bigger man obliged, bending his arm so that RiRi dropped suddenly to the ground. She would have fallen flat on her face if her arm weren't being held at a cruel angle. Instead she kind of hung there. At least her feet were on the ground and she was coughing now.

I hadn't been seen yet, still half in the farthest tent and with Lincoln's unobservant current state. I slowly pulled back through the flap, turning to show Slopper a finger pressed to lips. He hadn't moved. I reached beside my bag and retrieved the rifle. All the saliva dried up in my mouth. "Linc, we got the 'cruiters coming any minute now. Every head is worth a fortune. Don't damage any of 'em."

They were traitors. Indians turning in Indians for reward. I couldn't believe it. I'd been lulled to complacency by the color of skin and an accent that made home feel real.

"She's hurt! Let her go!" It was Rose. She'd emerged from her tent and was holding Minerva back at the door. Minerva, who had seen RiRi dangling from the man's meaty grasp while her arm twisted at a sick angle, was frantic to claw past and into the clearing. The sight of the old woman in her kerchief and long skirts over track pants made Lincoln laugh. He dropped RiRi to clutch his belly, and that's when Travis turned his head and Chi-Boy made his move.

He jumped from his crouch on the ground, the knife out of his arm and back in his hand. He lunged at Travis, driving the blade into the man's leg, just above the knee. The older man screamed and dropped the gun in pain and shock. Miig jumped at it, smashing a fist into the howling man's chin on the way back up.

Lincoln, watching the group start to rally, picked RiRi up and threw her over his wide shoulder. I didn't see a weapon on him, but just the sheer size of him matched with his unnatural state made him a danger to us all, especially for RiRi. He turned and started to run.

"Stop!" Miig yelled. "I'll shoot!"

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But he wouldn't. The clearing was dark and RiRi was at risk. Instead Miig gave chase, Wab at his heels, quickly catching up and passing him, her old runner instincts returned. Rose followed. Behind her, Minerva jogged, her arms pumping at her sides, not going much faster than a walk, her lips pushed out like a Nish GPS system. While half the group took off after RiRi and the hulk, the twins had gathered up Chi-Boy, pulling him away from Travis, who was crumpled on the ground with a bloody mouth. Tree ran to my tent where I sat half in, half out.

"You okay, French?" He peered in behind me at Slopper. "Slopper?" He gave the boy the thumbs-up sign. Slopper just stared in return. "We gotta tie this guy up quick, Tree." Zheegwon came up behind his brother.

I watched them tie Travis's hands to his ankles with a piece of rope before slinging my rifle on my back. Then I ran off into the dark after my family.

I ran hard, with abandon, into the narrow swatch of the clearing, darker here with the closer trees. I ran full out, almost tripping over the huddled shape of Minerva where she sat, crouched on the ground, rocking back and forth and muttering words I couldn't pick up. I managed to avoid her, but slammed my shoulder hard into a protruding birch branch. I heard a dry snap, and I wasn't sure if it had come from the branch or the explosion of heat in my arm or from further up the path. It didn't matter. I just kept going.

Up ahead I could see shadows and then figures as the trees opened and the moon poured into the clearing before the cliff. I slowed down to assess, like Miig had taught me to do. One of the figures was on the ground, another was bent over, hands on knees. The third was holding on to a tree, leaning over the edge.

And that was it.

There were only three.

I doubled my speed and burst into the moonlight. Wab was on the ground. She looked like she was sleeping, but her eyes were wide open.

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Rose was bent over, throwing up between her feet, hysterical in between retches. It was Miig who leaned over the edge. I grabbed him first, taking his forearm into my grip. It's a good thing, too, because his hand let go seconds later, too shaky to hold on. I pulled him back hard, and he fell on top of my legs on the grass.

"Where'd they go? Did we lose them?"

I refused to put the pieces together.

"Miig, move, get up." I struggled under his dead weight. "Miig, c'mon, we're giving him too much of a head start. I'll go into the bush on the west. You take the east side."

He wasn't moving. I got angry, pushed at him, kicking him in the back to dislodge my other foot from under him. Still, he was motionless.

"Come on, you guys!" I was yelling now, pacing a small half circle around the catatonic group. "Let's go! Do I need to do this alone?" I waited two seconds for an answer. "Fine, I'm going."

I walked between Miig and the cliff, on my way to into the trees where I'd mimicked Chi-Boy's stealth earlier on, like that meant anything. And then I saw it. A single pink boot, all shiny like candy, one of the fastest boots in the world, real nishin. And it was empty, on its side, at the edge of the cliff.

There is a feeling that has no name because, really, it is such an absence that it exists only in a vacuum of feeling and so, really, can have no name. It sucks you inside out and places you in a space where touch and taste and sound and sight all turn to ash. I was there now, alone.

There was no mooring, no ground, no sky. There was just me and the boot, and then, suddenly, the warm weight of the rifle on my back.

My vision narrowed, and I turned on a heel, throwing myself back the way I came. From a thousand miles away I heard Miigwans call, "French! Come back." But it could have just been the wind.

I passed Minerva and the broken birch and I bounded over the ground,

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legs aching, the gun bouncing softly against my spine. Later, I couldn't recall this journey back to the camp. There was no planning, no ideas or theories or even any real rage locked inside my skull. There was just nothing. Nothing but a pink boot without a girl to wear it and a rifle that I knew as well as my own hand.

I crashed into the campsite, startling the twins, who had finished tying up Travis and were guarding him with the handgun. Slopper sat at the edge of the tent, the blankets still pulled tight around his cheeks. "French! Jesus, you scared us." Tree trained the gun back at our prisoner from where he had pointed it at me and wiped his forehead with the back of a dirty hand, leaving a streak like paint. "Where're the others?"

"Did you get RiRi?" Zheegwon moved closer to his brother. I must have had it written all over my face, because he grabbed the baseball cap off Tree's head and pushed it over his own, eyes still on me.

"Frigging Linc. He killed her, didn't he? Dammit, I told him to lay off those pills." Travis spat blood into the grass and sighed. He struggled to his knees, hands pulled tight behind him, and looked up.

"Uh, listen, boy. There's no use in us fighting now."

I reached behind me and yanked on the strap, bringing the rifle to my side. I cocked the barrel and trained it on the prostrate man in front of me. Panic flashed across his face and then it settled into a look of soft, practiced pleading. That's the only time I felt anger through it all, seeing that rehearsed mask slip over his dark face.

"Hey now, come on. Let me go now and I can show the rest of you the way out of here, before the white boys show up." Blood and spit flew with his words, betraying his anxiety under the mask.

"French? French, it's okay, we got him under control." Tree was trying to reason with me. Or maybe it was just the wind.

I kept my eyes on Travis. He nodded at Tree's wisdom and then tried a weak smile at me. "Yeah, c'mon, Brother."

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Time is slow in that vacuum space. In this new space, I had time to aim squarely between the man's eyes, watching his muscles contort and his skin wrinkle. Then I decided against it, lowering the barrel to his chest: always go for the sure target. Miig had taught us that on one of my first hunts, and I listen to my Elders. I dug a shoe in to accommodate for the kick back and bent at the knee, just like Miig had showed me.

"Come on now! Don't be stupid, kid! We can get out of here. Let's go! Come on, kid! I didn't mean it! It's nothing personal!"

I heard him whine a little at the end of his plea. But then, maybe it was just the wind.

I pulled the trigger and the wind stopped blowing.