

A Sacrifice of Innocence

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## Chapter 1 – Hunting and Hunted

Soft Foot waited patiently in the foliage next to the grove they had waiting besides. She scanned the horizon, looking for the movement of deer, until her eyes met with Black Moon's. He was crouched down in the bushes, waiting alongside her. The colorful beads and feathers that hung from him betrayed any potential camouflage his leather clothes would have otherwise provided, and the handle of his wooden club stuck out of his empty backpack that he had set to the side. Shortly after making eye contact, he stretched his lean and muscular arms before picking up his dagger that he had previously laid down on the ground. He broke eye contact with her to start scraping his scalp, removing any stubble to either side of his short, black mohawk that continued behind his head and hung down another twenty centimeters. His knife wasn't meant for combat, only for skinning any potential game they managed to hunt. The actual hunt itself wasn't up to him.

Soft Foot glanced at the fresh deer tracks she was standing over that led them to this area before resuming her search for them. The early morning fog and dim lighting made the job tricky, but it luckily wasn't long before a dozen deer made their way out of the trees a few hundred meters away from the two hunters. She moved herself into position, and true to her name, she moved with a stealthiness that none could match. Her father used to wonder how the tent door kept getting opened at night, and it took him years before finally catching her in the act due to how stealthy she naturally moved, earning her the name she has. She moved with such grace that even the beads hanging off of her didn't make any noise, nor did the feathers rub on any other surface. She was dressed similarly to Black Moon: she had leather clothing with colorful beads and feathers hanging off of it. A quiver full of arrows was on her back for the bow she held in her left hand. The only other objects on her were a amulet around her neck with a turquoise stone in the center and her skinning knife that was attached to her leather belt.

After moving so that there were no foliage or branches between her and the deer, she silently withdrew an arrow from her quiver and notched it in her bow. Standing tall, she pulled the string back while muttering under her breath, "Ancestors, please guide my arrow." She released her fingers, and the arrow shot out from the bow with a *twang* in to the general direction of the deer. She didn't need to be accurate.

As the arrow was in flight, Soft Foot quickly set the bow down and put her hands right in front of her chest as if she was holding a ball as she stood back up. She tensed her hands and started to call upon the power of her ancestors to help guide the arrow. She had to concentrate on the act, but she was more than used to it at this point, having hunted for her tribe for the past 10 years. Her eyes started to glow a light shade of turquoise, subtle at first, but it rapidly grew into a noticeable projection that Black Moon could notice, even from slightly behind her. Her hands started to glow with a shade that matched the color of her amulet and her eyes. As she channeled her energy, she called upon her ancestors and the spirits to guide the arrow to its target. As if the air itself responded to her wishes, the air around the arrow was gently pushed in the direction it needed to fly. Wind from the right of its path pushed the arrow on course and then air from below and behind ensured the arrow went far enough to reach the distant deer. The wind from behind the arrow sped it up, giving it additional piercing power to deliver a clean blow. Soft Foot almost faltered though. She could still see out of her eyes, but she could also somehow *see* from the arrow as well. Right before the arrow hit the deer, it stopped in its tracks and looked up – right into her eyes from across the field. This was something that had never happened before, it unnerved her for it must surely be a bad sign. Instead of letting the arrow trail off and miss, she quickly regained her composure and continued guiding the arrow to its mark, penetrating the deer's chest and dropping it instantly, causing the other startled deer to flee.

Her previous moment of misgivings was broken by a whoop of joy that Black Moon let out as the

deer hit the ground. He excitedly sprung up, clasping her right shoulder with his left hand. "Nice Shot!"

"Thanks, although something felt abnormal this time..." She trailed off, letting her built up energy dissipate as her hands and eyes returned to normal. She was thinking about how the deer had looked directly at her. It was not a good omen.

"I guess, but you got it, just like you always do! There's nothing more to worry about, we now have food for another few days." His excited smile slowly faded as he saw how troubled she was.

"I suppose, but I will need to speak with my father and possibly the rest of the council when we get back about this."

Black Moon didn't have the gift of the ancestors' power like she did, so he couldn't quite fully grasp what bothered her. Wishing to change the subject, he urged for her to follow him. "Come, let's get the horses and get over to the deer before any wolves find it." He removed his hand from her shoulder and turned to get the three horses that they had brought with them. He found the horses patiently waiting, tied to the tree where they had left them a few paces into the forest. He released the knots that bound them and led them into the clearing, allowing both of them to mount a horse and gallop more than 300 meters to the fallen deer.

They disembarked and got to work removing the organs from deer and preparing it for the journey home. As they crouched on the ground, Black Moon's clothing moved enough that Soft Foot could see his black birthmark on the lower part of his left thigh, a mark that earned him his name at birth after he discovered it. Although everyone knew why he was named as such and had likely even seen his birthmark, he still preferred to keep it covered up as much as possible out of a mild embarrassment of it.

Soft Foot and Black Moon had been friends their whole lives, and they would tease each other on occasion. There was blood on their hands from dressing the deer, and she took the opportunity to wipe her red finger on his birthmark. Attempting to sound very authoritative, she informed him of his new name, "You will now be known as Red Moon," laughing at her own joke.

Black Moon glared at her before reaching down and attempting to wipe the blood away. His hands were also bloody though, so he only succeeded in making a bigger mark that was now smeared across his entire lower thigh. Soft Foot tipped her head back with laughter so he reached over and pushed her backwards while she wasn't prepared. His slightly bigger and bulkier frame made pushing her over quite easily. "Clumsy Foot is what you are" he muttered, just loud enough for her to hear as she was getting back up. Smiling, they continued to dress the deer until everything they needed was either in Black Moon's backpack or slung across their third horse's back.

The two rode the horses for a few hours at a leisurely pace until they got back to the camp where the rest of the Feather tribe was. They discussed all sorts of topics on the way back: how the days were getting shorter, what they would do once winter came, why Black Moon still hadn't managed to find a wife who would take him into her home, and lastly why Soft Foot felt that disturbing omen from the ancestors. While riding, Soft Foot started to hear subtle whispers, messages from their ancestors. She couldn't quite discern what they were saying, she had not heard them enough to learn to infer their meanings, but it made her more concerned following her experience while hunting.

They arrived in their camp shortly after noon and split ways, Black foot taking the spoils of the hunt to get it further dressed and skinned, and Soft Foot going to her tent where her husband and two

children were currently at. Wanting to clean herself, the first thing Soft Foot did when she got home was to rush to their supplies and grab a water bladder that she took outside. She stripped down and quickly washed herself off, intent on wiping away the blood from their hunt. It was chilly out, but not cold enough for it to be uncomfortable yet. While she was washing herself, her family members wandered outside to where she was washing.

“Mommy!” Their smallest child excitedly shouted, rushing to hug her leg.

“Stay back Little One, otherwise you will get your clothes all wet!” She was still washing the blood of her hands and arms and she didn't feel like washing his clothes because any of it got on him.

Looking dejected, he paused before quickly getting bored. “Come On Long Legs, let's go play!” he shouted to his older brother, running past his brother's legs with were as tall as Little One's entire body.

Long Legs grinned and turned to chase after his younger brother, swiftly catching up to him with his abnormally long legs.

Soft Foot continued washing herself while the children were occupied.

Handing her a towel to dry herself off with, Sleeping Wolf, Soft Foot's husband, absently commented on their smallest child while looking after them. “We really do need to give Little One a proper name sometime soon.” He received an acknowledging grunt from Soft Foot before continuing. “Successful hunt I see.”

“Yes. Although something felt wrong, I think the ancestors are trying to tell me something.” She finished drying herself and went into the tent to get dressed where Sleeping Wolf followed her. Noticing that he hadn't really said anything after her last comment, she looked at him to see a slightly thoughtful, but worried expression on his face. “What is it ?”

“It's just that,” he paused, considering how to express himself, “your father almost said the same thing. He has called for a council meeting at twilight to discuss what the ancestors have been saying to him.”

“I see.” She looked at the ground in contemplation. “So it wasn't just me...”

“And not just you two either, a few other council members have expressed concern over what the ancestors have whispered to them. It's making the entire camp anxious.”

“I will try to reassure everyone that we are fine, but I am not sure if I believe it myself. Let's go to the top of the hill to the south, just to check out the surrounding area before night falls.” She grabbed her backpack and put in a small snack of dried meat and a water bladder as well as her quiver of arrows. Sleeping Wolf was ready before she was so they went outside and mounted their horses.

Long Legs saw them on their horses and he ran over to them, Little One trailing after him. “Where are you guys going?” Long legs was merely curious, but Little One looked concerned that Soft Foot was leaving just after coming back from her morning absence.

“We are just going to go up to the hill over there and come back. We will only be gone a couple hours,” Soft Foot considered her children quickly, “stay safe, and stay out of trouble while we're both gone!”

The two left the camp and rode for a couple hours in silence as their horses ascended the hill for them. Once they got near the top, they both dismounted and walked the remaining distance by foot, guiding their horses with them. Once at the summit, Soft Foot looked around the panorama before her. Everything looked in order, and Sleeping Wolf commented on the fact. There were no other humans in sight, save for their camp. There were no smoke or odd smells, yet Soft Foot still felt an uneasiness she couldn't define.

The wind whipped her long black hair onto her face, forcing her to brush it aside. As she removed the hair from her face, she could hear some quiet voice, uttering words of caution. The ancestors were obviously trying to warn her of something and while she would be a fool to ignore their messages, she still couldn't decipher them. Like Black Moon, Sleeping Wolf didn't have the powers that she and a few select others did, but he could better understand her than Black Moon could since the two of them had been a couple since they were teenagers. He could sense her uneasiness, and he knew that it must be because of the ancestors' words that she was likely hearing. In an effort to comfort her, he stepped beside her, reaching his arm around her back and pulling her close. Enjoying his warmth in the crisp air, she let herself get pulled in and rested her head on his shoulder for a few minutes before Sleeping Wolf broke the silence.

“What do they say to you?” He was curious what exactly she was experiencing.

“I don't know, it's still hard to decipher their messages. I don't feel we should ignore their warnings though. Something isn't right.” They remained in silence for a few minutes, enjoying each other's presence. “Let's head back to camp before it gets any later. I want to dispel any unrest amongst the others before the council meeting.”

Just as they had come, they descended the hill and made their way back to camp as the sun started to inch towards the hilltops to the west. After bringing their horses back to their tent and tying them up, Sleeping Wolf went to find their children and make sure they hadn't gotten into any trouble while Soft Foot walked around the camp, trying to make small talk with some of the sixty other members of their tribe. Some people expressed concern to her over what they were hearing from the others and she tried to assure them that it wasn't worth worrying over and that anything of concern would be brought up in the council meeting and dealt with. Others were just happy to talk with Soft Foot – she was often away on hunting trips for the tribe.

The sun started to dip behind the western horizon, and thick white smoke started pouring out of the top of the council tent. The fire had been lit, signifying that all council members should now come. Soft Foot started walking towards the tent, and she met up with the other council members along the way. They ducked through the entry into the tent and sat themselves around the fire. Soft Foot orientated herself next to her father, the Chief of their tribe. The small but strong cast shadows on the tent wall of Soft Foot, her father, and the ten other council members that were seated in a circle around the fire. Soft foot silently observed the other members. Six other women and five other men, including the chief, looked at her and each other. Only about one in every ten children ever achieved the ability to directly call upon the powers of the ancestors, but the council had an unsurprisingly disproportionate amount of those with this ability with five of the seven women and three of the five men able to communicate with and invoke the power of their ancestors to one degree or another. Those with elevated powers weren't always on the council for every tribe, nor were councils solely constituted of those with powers, but there was a tendency, as shown by all 8 of those with higher powers in the Feather tribe being on the council.

There was an uneasiness in the room which Rainbow Feather, the chief and Soft Foot's father, broke. “I trust you all know why this council meeting has been called.” His somber face and tone

cleared up any confusion for anyone who wasn't sure. "The ancestors have been speaking to me today. Fleeting whispers that are hard to understand, but I have heard enough to hear their warnings. Something is coming, and we must do something about it."

"I too have been getting messages from our ancestors," one of the other council members spoke up. "But what should we do? What sort of threat do we face? Is it a lack of successful hunts and food? Sickness? A sudden winter? Attacks from others? Or could -"

"I do not know!" Rainbow Feather cut her off, his rainbow-colored feather on his head that he was born with rocking back and forth as he shook his head. "In any case, I believe we should move the camp. I fear an attack above all else, and moving would be the safest course of action. It is possible that those who wish to do us harm have become aware of our location."

"Winter is almost upon us," another one of the members spoke up. He was older than the rest, and his weathered face, scrunched back, and long white, braided hair showed how many more years he had experienced than the rest. His voice crackled as he continued, "And you want us to move our camp? If we do get surprised by snowfall, that will make our winter even more difficult. We will likely need to stop wherever we are at that time, and that could be most impractical."

Rainbow Feather considered his words for a moment, slowly looking around the room at the other members before continuing. "I believe the spirits and ancestors will protect us against snowfall. They are already warning us, and we should try to heed their warnings. I fear that staying here will result in an even greater potential catastrophe."

Mumbles of agreement and disagreement were exchanged between the council members as they weighed their options. Soft Foot looked at her father who returned her glance with a look of helplessness at the rest of the council's indecisiveness. He had never heard warnings quite like this before, and even he himself was concerned.

"I have also heard worrying things from the ancestors" Soft Foot offered as she moved to stand up, her shadow on the wall growing larger. "Just today while I was hunting, I heard whispers of caution." She paused to look at the others. "As I shot the deer that Black Moon and I brought back today, the deer itself looked at me. Straight into my eyes. I believe we should follow my father's wisdom and move our camp, let us find a more secluded area to camp before winter sets in."

More murmurs of agreement and disagreement followed her recommendation, but her speech seemed to have caused the right effect as more people were starting to agree with Soft Foot and Rainbow Feather. A few other members stood up, voicing their support for their decision. More followed suit until only 3 remained sitting, including the oldest member with the white hair.

"I do not think it to be a wise idea myself, but the tribe has decided, and we will follow suit," he whispered. The other remaining 2 nodded their heads in support of his reluctant acceptance.

"So it is decided," Rainbow Feather moved to end the meeting, "We will start packing everything first thing in the morning and we will set out at high noon. We will go to the west, where the hills are more fierce, and we will seek shelter in the confines of a more narrow and secretive valley. Go now and sleep with your families, we have a long journey over the next few days. I pray to our ancestors that it is the correct decision."

Those who remained sitting got up, following the others out of the tent as everyone went back to their own tents. Soft Foot waited behind, hoping to be able to speak to her father in private before heading home.

After everyone else had left, he turned and addressed her. “What do you think?” he simply asked her. “Is this the correct course of action?”

“I trust in your judgment. Like I said, I have also heard these whispers of caution, albeit much fainter I assume. Do you think moving into the hills will really protect us?”

His face got longer while as looked into the fire, pondering the question. “I am not sure,” he quietly answered. He closed his eyes against the fire's brightness.

Uncomfortable at his uneasiness and unsure what to say, Soft Foot thought to recount her walk with Sleeping Wolf. “I went to the top of the hill to the south. I didn't see anything, but I am also uneasy. I don't know what else to do, but I think your decision is the wisest we can do. I just wish the ancestors could be more clear sometimes.”

He smiled at her complaint. “We all wish they were more clear.” He opened his eyes and looked at her. “Go to bed my child, Sleeping Wolf is probably waiting for you.”

“Yea, if he isn't already asleep. You know how he got his name.”

Her comment was returned with a laugh from Rainbow Feather, something that both of them were happy to hear during this solemn evening. “Yes, I know. Regardless, we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.” He moved closer to the fire and reached his hand over it. Pulling from the powers of his ancestors and focusing on his hand, his eyes glowed a faint shade of blue. The air under his hand started to glow a faint blue and condense its humidity, causing a small shower of rain to spring out from under his palm, dousing the flame and casting the inside of the tent in darkness. Rainbow Feather's eyes adjusted to the darkness, only to see that Soft Foot had already left the tent without him even hearing it. Grinning, he went into his private attachment to the main tent to retire for the evening in his bed.

Soft Foot walked back to her tent and silently slipped inside. Laying down on their bed that Sleeping Wolf was on, she startled him out of his half-sleep.

“You need to announce yourself more!” He scolded her in a hushed tone. “It always scares me when you sneak up on me like that.”

“Sorry,” she chuckled, “It's just too natural for me.” She crawled underneath the blanket and lay next to him, absorbing his warmth.

“How did the council meeting go?” he mumbled, trying not to fall back asleep.

“We will move the camp tomorrow. To the west, where it is hopefully safer.”

“I bet it's nothing. We will all be fine.”

“I hope so.” They grew silent. Sleeping Wolf quickly fell asleep while Soft Foot remained wondering what the future held for her, her husband, kids, and entire tribe. Barely audible whispers cast doubts in her mind as she finally drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter 2 – The Mission

He Who Howls was ascending the steps of the stone temple in the middle of the city. The flat-

topped pyramidal temple jutted out from the smaller surrounding buildings in the city, casting a shadow over the buildings that lay on the opposite side of the sun from the temple. Anyone else would have been exhausted after climbing the several hundred steps to get to the top, but He Who Howls had done it so much, it was nothing more than a simple walk for him. His towering height and bulky body would have been enough to make him stand out among the others, but his clothing and head made him stand out to be truly unique. His typical cloth clothes were painted in bright shades like most of the inhabitants of the city, but his golden accessories made him stand out, reflecting light in every direction. He wore multiple golden bracelets and anklets on all 4 limbs, and they jingled with every movement he made. The sun reflected off his golden earrings, causing bright, circular reflections to bounce around as his head moved. An elaborate golden necklace hung from his neck, holding up charms and other special heirlooms under it. He was not dressed to move quietly or participate in combat, he moved to impress others with his status as a higher class citizen. He was born into the higher levels of society, as seen by his purposely formed head which was pressed into a cone shape by wooden boards as he was developing as a child, and he didn't want people to forget that. The most remarkable feature about him though was a glowing, black rune in the shape of a jaguar on his large forehead. It seemed to be more of a shadow than a glow, sucking in the surrounding light, giving off a very eerie and intimidating presence.

He Who Howls finally reached the top of the stairs, pausing for a moment for a quick breathe before continuing as he looked around the plateau at the top of the pyramid. With his gold no longer jingling as he stood still, he rapidly become uneasy in the stillness and pressed forward towards the throne at the other side of the clearing. He carefully walked around the left side of altar which lay in the center in order to avoid the sticky red stains surrounding it. He stopped shortly before the throne and admired the golden details on the stone throne before him that depicted a myriad of artwork: battles and sacrifices, food and wine, gods and death. His admiration of the throne was cut short by the figure standing to the right of the throne.

In a low, growling voice, the figure addressed him without turning around. "He Who Howls," the figure simply said. The figure was looking out over the city it ruled over, seemingly disinterested in him, although He Who Howls had been summoned by them. Some thought He Who Howl's outfit to be flashy, but it paled in comparison to the other's outfit which was an extravagant display of colors, gold, and accessories. Completely covered from head to ankles in colorful clothing, there were plants, strips of fabric, gold jewelry, and souvenirs from previous sacrifices hanging off its clothing. Every possible color was represented on its body, causing one to lose focus on any one specific point in the explosion of colors and materials. The only parts that betrayed the colorful theme was its black paws that stuck out of its pants and shirt and its black tail that poked out of the pants on its back. Its attire rustled and jingled as it turned around to face He Who Howls, revealing the head and body of an elaborately dressed Jaguar that was standing on its hind legs like a human would.

He Who Howls got down on one knee under the gaze of the Jaguar God, afraid to show any disrespect.

"Stand, my most prized warrior," the Jaguar God commanded him.

He Who Howls complied, but still averted his eyes from the cool, narrow slits in the Jaguar God's eyes by looking at the other's feet.

"I require another tribute." The Jaguar God's grating voice conveyed the exact message that He Who Howls feared he had been summoned for.

"Already?" He tried to not let desperation seek into his voice. "Not enough time has passed since our last sacrifice. They are becoming too frequent."

The Jaguar God coldly eyed the pathetic human before him before suddenly roaring at him, "Look at me!" The Jaguar God made the entire ground shake for emphasis, causing He Who Howls to slightly stumble before regaining his balance and finally looking into the Jaguar God's eyes. The Jaguar God changed its tone to a gentle purring, "My hunger grows, He Who Howls, and I demand another sacrifice. It is the only way that I can ensure the safety of this city, and your life." The Jaguar God was sure to end the conversation with a subtle threat.

Now afraid to look away from the Jaguar God's drilling gaze, he cautiously protested. "But all nearby cities have been too recently attacked. I don't think there is much nobility left to sacrifice."

"Yes, you must go further this time. I have consulted the stars, and there are smaller tribes to the west. They don't live in large cities like us and those surrounding us. They are smaller, weaker, and unsuspecting."

"I have heard of tribes like these, but without a big city to orientate towards or roads to follow, how shall we find them?"

"Follow the jaguar in the forest. He will guide you where you need to go." The Jaguar God indicated that the conversation was over by turning around to resume its gaze over the city.

Unsure of what exactly the Jaguar God meant, he remained there for a moment to ponder on how they would find the other jaguar it had spoken of. Not wanting to incur the wrath of the Jaguar God, he turned around and walked down the few hundred steps to the base of the pyramid.

The Jaguar God was a lord from the Underworld, and it now required another sacrifice for its domain from which it often came. Now He Who Howls had to go and find some warriors to take with him on another raid, although they just went on one a few days prior. As he was walking over to the house of his best warrior, Maize Bringer, he pondered on the fate of the sacrifices. They were said to be eternally stuck in the Underworld, undergoing eternal deaths and suffering for the Jaguar God's pleasure. It was not a fate he wanted. Shaking his head and pushing the thoughts out of his head, he got to Maize Bringer's house and entered by ducking through the doorway.

"Maize Bringer, prepare for combat! We leave immediately." He remained standing by the front door, his head brushing the roof.

Maize Bringer walked in from kitchen where he was eating with his wife. As he walked in, he looked up into the eyes of He Who Howls, whose presence dwarfed everything else in the room. "Now? But we just got back a few days ago from our last raid."

"I know, but the Jaguar God demands it."

There wasn't much more to say – the Jaguar God's word was final. "Very well, let me grab my things."

"Yes, do that, and I will do the same. Join me at my house when you are finished, and grab a dozen men along the way." He Who Howls then turned and ducked through the doorway and leisurely walked to his house. Although his house was one of the largest in the city, he was the only one who resided inside it. Most of his rooms remained completely empty save for dust.

He went to his armory and grabbed what he would take with him. He switched out his ceremonial clothing for his quilted cotton shirt that was soaked in salt water to provide additional stopping

power against slashes by sharp objects. The shirt was still colorful, but obviously more intended for combat than upholding appearances. He removed his golden necklace and earrings, not wanting them to get caught on anything in combat. He kept the bracelets and anklets on, he thought the jingling they made helped intimidate enemies. He attached a sturdy spear and a woven shield across his back, for use in close quarters. As a backup, he attached his short sword to his belt. He then grabbed twelve javelin-sized darts and his gold encrusted atlatl, which he used to project darts with extreme force and accuracy. Armed to the teeth, he stepped outside and waited for a few minutes until Maize Bringer and the dozen others he tasked the other with bringing walked up the street to his place. They had a mix of short swords, atlatls with darts, and spears and shields, and He Who Howls looked over the men over approvingly.

He spoke loud enough for the whole group to hear him. “We will go far to the west this time. The Jaguar God requires another sacrifice, and smaller tribes should be out there where we can easily capture suitable tributes. As always, we will return victorious and earn the favor of the Jaguar God who rules over our city.” He paused, letting them absorb their mission. “We will recruit another few dozen men as we walk through the rest of the city. Go from house to house and ask for the man of the house. Ensure they have a weapon, and make them join us. We will likely be gone for a few days, and they can return working on the farms once we return.”

He Who Howls turned and started walking out from the city center with the others following him. As they left the confines of the inner city, the architecture rapidly shifted from elaborate stone masonry with clean streets and colorful motifs to that of the lower class of people in hastily built stone huts. The small band made their way down the unkempt and uneven streets with the other warriors stopping by every few houses and drafting others into their raid.

The war party walked out of the west exit of the city with He Who Howls at the front, heavily armed like Maize Bringer and the other twelve warriors. The seventy drafted commoners who followed the more well-equipped fourteen warriors were much less prepared. They lacked proper armor, and their clothes were smeared with dirt from the fields they were usually working in. Most of them were only carrying one weapon, most of them spears, although a couple had swords or the combination of an atlatl and some darts. A few of the most poor from them only had simple wooden clubs they had to attack and defend themselves with.

As they left Red River City, He Who Howls saw a massive jaguar sitting on the path in front of them. He Who Howls was already at least a head taller than everyone else in the city, but this jaguar towered over him by a head itself, forcing him to look up to see into the jaguar's eyes, an unusual occurrence for him. He Who Howls expressed no fear and walked straight towards the jaguar. As they got within a few meters of it, the jaguar got up and turned around, leading the group through the forest to the west.

### Chapter 3 – Howls In The Night

Soft Foot had trouble sleeping. The decision from the previous night's council meeting made her anxious. She was simultaneously excited to be moving and worried about the unknown danger lurking up on them. If that wasn't enough, the whispering from her ancestors kept coming to her, sometimes waking her up. The intensity of their whispers grew over time, forbidding her from sleeping as their volume and frequency kept gradually increasing. She lay there in bed, unsure of what to make of the distorted warnings. Predawn light started to faintly illuminate the interior of the tent after her long, restless night. Exhausted after barely getting any sleep, the ancestors' voices suddenly became very loud. It wasn't many voices this time, but one distinct voice. This voice was unlike any previous whispering as she listened to the new blood-curdling howl that made all of her hairs stand on end.

Her groggy eyes snapped open with the realization that it was not the ancestors' voices she was hearing, but an actual sound from outside. Not recognizing the howl to be from any animal she knew, she feared the worst and grabbed her dagger and a spear before stepping outside. As she stepped outside the tent, the howling was joined by screams from her tribe members from within their tents. They were under attack, and some tents were already being ransacked and the inhabitants were either fleeing, being captured, or killed.

Soft Foot surveyed her surroundings, trying to make sense of the situation. The sun had come from the east, and now that the sun was just starting to rise, it meant that she and the other Feather tribe members were now looking into the sun, making it difficult to see their attackers. She started to invoke the powers of her ancestors. Her eyes started to glow turquoise, and she gained a higher clarity of the battlefield around her – and the dart which was headed straight for her chest. She jumped to the side and rolled away from the dart which was about to impale her. Coming out of her roll, there were already a few attackers with spears in her immediate surroundings. She held up her dagger in her left hand and caused a sudden flash of bright light to erupt, temporarily disorientating and confusing her attackers. She used the opportunity her flash created to deftly slash one of the attackers' throat with her spear before plunging her spear into the chest of another. She whirled around and charged the last attacker while he was still blinded with just enough time to get on top of him and plunge her dagger into his chest before he could get his senses back. She grabbed his spear as he fell to the ground and jumped back inside their tent.

Sleeping Wolf almost hit her with a wooden club but stopped when he saw her glowing eyes. “What is happening?!” He was frantic and scared.

“I don't know, we are under attack. They are wearing clothes unlike any tribe I have seen before.” She paused, catching her breath. “Grab the children and run. They came from the east, run away from the sun into the forest!”

Long Legs and Little One were still in their blankets. Awakened by the battle but petrified with fear, they didn't know what to do. Sleeping Wolf ran over to them, throwing the blankets off and yelled at them to get up. His command snapped them out of their inactivity and they sprang up out of their bed. Sleeping Wolf swooped Little One up into his arm and guided Long Legs to the door.

“Come now, I will stay here and protect the camp and your escape.” Soft Foot quickly looked around and saw her breastplate made of horizontal wooden tubes which she hastily put on before stepping outside with the other three following her. “Take them and run into the hills!”

As Sleeping Wolf and the other two took off for the hills, Soft Foot turned around to resurvey their camp. As her attention was turned away from her family, a dart thrown by the tallest attacker was flung straight for Sleeping Wolf. As he threw the dart out of his atlatl, it caught on fire in mid-air, hurtling through the air with unrealistic speeds. The fiery dart caught a few people's attention and a small stream of reddish light erupted from the hands of one of the other council member's hands, striking the dart and knocking it off course with the dart landing harmlessly in the ground to the fleeing group's feet.

Soft Foot had quickly dispatched another few attackers and had been joined by some other tribe members, including Black Moon with his club. The six of them made their way around one of the bigger tents, near her father's tent. She looked on in horror at the awesome display of enemies that she saw. A man, taller than any that she had ever seen was lumbering across the field. He was hurling darts with his atlatl that were catching on fire and impaling objects with unrealistic speeds. Leaving no avenue of destruction untouched, he would step up to tents, and with just the touch of

his hand, the tent would erupt in flames, cooking anyone alive who was unlucky enough to still be inside. There were many more around him throwing darts from their atlatls, or just projecting flashes of bright energy that struck targets, burning or impaling them. It seemed that they had attacked with more people than their entire tribe had, and not everyone in their tribe was able to fight back. The attackers were utilizing their ancestral powers with brutal results, burning and shredding everything in their path.

“Come, it looks like they are making their way towards the main tent!” Soft Foot ordered the others to follow. Her father was in there, and she wanted to make sure he was safe.

As they were nearing the tent, a spiral of fire erupted from the other side of the tent, directed towards the attackers. Rainbow Feather had emerged from the tent and was directing all of the energy he could at them, himself intent on protecting the other tribe members too. His blast of fire incinerated a few of the commoners and even a couple of the better warriors who failed to use their powers to defend themselves in time. Standing near the target of Rainbow Feather's blast, the giant turned his full attention towards Rainbow Feather.

He Who Howls smiled, revealing a mouthful of red-stained teeth. *He would be a perfect sacrifice*, he thought to himself, approaching Rainbow Feather with malevolent intent.

Soft Foot and the others attempted to make it to the source of the spiral of fire on the other side of the tent, knowing that it came from Rainbow Feather. As they were about to pass the corner of the large tent, they were cut off by another group of ten attackers who came around the corner. Soft Foot instantly summoned her powers into an orb of turquoise energy around her hand which she flung at them. The ball exploded on contact, instantly eliminating two of them and hindering another two. Black Moon rushed past her and hit one of the disorientated ones in the face, crushing his face with a brutality that made some of the other attackers recoil. An enemy warrior launched a dart from his atlatl at one of Soft Foot's companions, where it burst into green energy, striking him through his stomach and killing him. Soft Foot focused her attention on the warrior with powers, projecting a beam of light into his face, blinding him long enough for another of her companions to shoot him with two arrows, once through the chest and the other in the throat. He grabbed his throat as blood filled his lungs, and he crumpled in heap. Seeing this, one of the commoners panicked and threw his spear at them. Soft foot dodged his spear, but her companion behind her wasn't as fortunate, and he was struck through the chest in her stead. Soft Foot wanted to finish off the remaining six enemies, so she threw another ball of energy at them, killing one, but blinding the others momentarily. She infused the tip of the spear she was holding with turquoise energy and she rapidly stabbed 2 of them before they could see again. Black Moon had sprung into action again, and together the two of them quickly dispatched the remaining enemies.

Soft Foot paused just long enough to establish that there were no more standing enemies in their immediate vicinity. She noticed that she had lost two of the others that were with her so she quickly prayed for their spirits and hoped they would join the ranks of their ancestors before pressing on.

“We need to hurry, we need to get to my father!”

She and the other three ran around the corner of the now burning tent, only to find their enemies already leaving. The giant was dragging Rainbow Feather behind him, and some of the other warriors were dragging other members from their tribe behind them as well, all bound with energy-infused shackles that restricted their movement and their ability to call upon their own ancestral powers.

Soft Foot moved to chase after them but Black Moon grabbed her wrist to stop her. “Stop Soft

Foot!” he yelled at her. “There are too many!”

“But they have my father!” Her eyes flashed with anger and she struggled to pull her arm away from him.

“I know, but look around you, there are only four of us, and there are still more than three dozen of them! We wouldn't stand a chance.”

She stopped pulling against Black Moon, accepting that he was right. She could do nothing more than helplessly watch as they waltzed further away. The attackers reached a giant jaguar which was standing by the treeline and He Who Howls picked up Rainbow Feather and strung him across the Jaguar's back. After securing Rainbow Feather, the giant turned to face the burning camp, making eye contact with Soft Foot. She could make out a black rune on his elongated forehead in addition to the wide smile splayed across his face.

“I will kill that man.” She promised to herself under her breath.

Black Moon let out a grunt of approval before responding. “But first, we need to find the others and regroup, they took us by much too big of a surprise.”

The four stood there helplessly watching the enemies retreat into the forest. The smoke from the burning tent singed Soft Foot's eyes, causing her to tear up as she watched her father and the others disappear into the tree line.

#### Chapter 4 – Reconciliation

The remaining Feather tribe members spent the rest of the morning searching for survivors and burying the dead. Small search parties went into the surrounding forests and hills to look for survivors. By the afternoon most of the tribe had been accounted for. Around twenty people had been killed and another 8 had been captured, only leaving around thirty Feather tribe members left.

Soft Foot was walking around, trying to clean up the camp and provide support where she could. A relieved smile broke across her face as she spotted Sleeping Wolf and their 2 children walking around the camp, looking for her. They all rushed to embrace each other, arms wrapping around each other.

“I am so happy that you all are safe!” Soft Foot couldn't contain her happiness that her entire family hadn't been taken away like her father. Tears of happiness and relief welled up in her eyes.

“We are, we were worried about you.” Sleeping Wolf rubbed his forehead against hers while the kids silently sniffled – they too had been worried about her.

A few moments passed before anyone said anything. “I don't know what to do now,” Soft Foot quietly began, “They took my father away. They took him and a few others. They outnumbered us too much in the end.” She looked away shamefully.

“There was nothing you could do about it,” he reassured her.

“We have to go after them.”

Sleeping Wolf was slightly taken aback. “Do you think that to be wise? We have neither enough supplies nor people now.”

“I don't know, but we can't just do nothing!”

“Call for another council meeting. We need the entire tribe to decide on our next course of action. With winter coming soon, we need to make sure whatever course of action we take is the correct one.”

She nodded her agreement. Finally pulling away from her family's embrace, she asked, “Please spread the word that we will have an emergency meeting. I will try to tell people to meet up in White Bear's tent since the main one is now burned down.”

They split up, trying to find all of the remaining council members and telling them to meet up in White Bear's tent. While walking around, Soft Foot stopped by the smoldering remains of her father's tent. There wasn't much left, but she saw the handle of his tomahawk laying on the ground. She reached down and grabbed it, brushing off the ash from that blanketed it. It was still warm from the fire, but not hot enough to burn anymore so she tucked the handle into her belt, intent on taking it with her.

She proceeded to make her way to White Bear's tent. White Bear was one of the other surviving council members, and she had a larger tent due to her larger family. Soft Foot entered the tent and sat down on the inside. She looked around at the seven others.

“Is this is?” Soft foot tried not to sound defeated, but the absence of any members was disheartening.

“I am afraid so” White Bear replied. “I am to understand that they took Rainbow Feather with them, along with Loud Crier. She With Spots and Red Elk are unfortunately dead.” A solemn silence ensued in the tent.

“So what do we do now?” Another cautiously pressed.

“We have to go after them!” Soft Foot was adamant.

“With what troops?” White Bear pressed. “They already attacked us with more people than our entire tribe had. That can only mean that they have even more people back home. We have no idea how many people we would be up against, nor do we even know where they went.”

“So we track them, I can use the powers of our ancestors to find them.”

“And what of the numbers?” White Bear retorted. “We simply just don't have enough people anymore. Winter is coming and we need to ensure that we can live through it. Going on the war path is not going to help with that.”

The discussion went back and forth for a while, with Soft Foot continuously losing ground to the other's reason. There would be no counter-raid, and they needed to prepare for winter, now more than ever.

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Black Moon was busy cleaning up outside along with the others while the council meeting took place. While throwing rubble and destroyed items in a pile to be burned later, he looked up to see a single figure on horseback emerging from the south of their camp. This person was not of their

tribe, and his first instinct was to call out in alarm, but he was transfixed on the person on the horse's back.

“Can it be?” he wondered out loud.

As the figure got close to their camp, other people stopped to take notice of the horseback rider slowly approaching their camp. Their reaction was similar to his: disbelief and awe. Wearing only leather pants and moccasins, the chilly air didn't seem to bother his exposed, dark chest. His long black hair fluttered in the wind, causing colors to pop in and out of sight as beads and feathers in his hair were uncovered and hidden again by his flowing hair. His graceful aura caused everyone to look at him, and his beautiful blue eyes, as blue as a winter sky's, caused everyone to longingly stare at him.

The Great Spirit rode his horse without guidance straight to White Bear's tent and dismounted. The entire camp had grown silent as everyone stopped what they were previously doing to watch him disembark his horse and calmly enter the tent.

Inside the tent, Soft Foot had almost given in to the plan of abandoning her father and the other captives to head further west and to seek refuge with the Horse tribe, a tribe they had always been on good terms with, for the winter. As soon as the Great Spirit entered the room, all conversation ceased and all eyes turned towards him. No introduction was necessary – everyone simply knew that he was the Great Spirit. Wordlessly, he walked over and sat down with the others in the circle.

Everyone in the room was shocked for words, nobody knew why exactly he was here or what to say to him. Fortunately, the Great Spirit broke the silence for them. “A pestilence is upon these lands,” he cryptically said, followed by a pause before continuing. “I have watched with sadness as it has spread. It comes from the east, taking human lives for its selfish desires. It has come too far, and it must be stopped, lest all these lands will be swept up in death.”

“We were attacked last night,” Soft Foot timidly offered. “They killed many, and they took some as captives, including our Chief, my father.”

“Yes. And more will be taken by them if they aren't stopped.”

“What are we to do?” White Bear was skeptical. “Winter is almost upon us, and now we are weaker than ever. We couldn't possibly attack them in our condition.”

“You will need help. There are many in between you and the source of this wave of death.”

“Where will we get this help?” Soft Foot wanted to fight the invaders, but she too was now growing worried about the prospect of attacking a stronger and more numerous foe.

“The other tribes will join you. I will send word to them that the Feather tribe needs help.”

“How?” White Bear was still unsure how he planned to get their help. The Feather tribe wasn't even on good terms with all the tribes in the area, often even clashing with a couple of them.

The Great Spirit didn't respond, opting instead to simply stand up and walk around the circle and back out of the tent. The others, unsure of what to do, silently exchanged glances before standing up to follow the Great Spirit outside.

Outside, everyone in the tribe watched the Great Spirit emerge from the tent followed by the other

eight council members. He stood still for a few moments, taking in a deep breath before a low rumble started to come out of his throat. The rumble developed into a harmonic melody that enthralled the entire camp. Such beauty had never been heard, and it brought a state of tranquility to everyone in the valley. His celestial voice sung out to the spirits to offer their aid, and while he was singing, birds of all sorts started amassing above him. Flying in a wide circle a few dozen meters above his head, eagles, falcons, crows, robins, and many other birds joined in harmony as they circled over the camp. They continued to fly above the spectators while the Great Spirit continued singing his song, and as he finished, the birds dispersed, heading to different tribes.

Several birds flew to each of the surrounding tribes, singing songs in an intricate pattern that were beautiful, making everyone in the other camps stop to listen. While the birds were not singing any understandable language, but rather with their normal bird-songs, the beautiful pattern and melody they did sing was somehow still understood by those with the powers of their ancestors. They understood that the Feather tribe had been attacked and that they needed to join them in arms to attack a growing darkness that threatened them all.

“All tribes within a bird's flight have been made aware of your situation, and the situation that they will face if they don't aid. They should be here before the fourth nightfall.”

“And What About You?” Soft Foot asked him. “Will you fight with us?”

“I cannot aid you in this fight,” he sadly responded, “I can only try to offer the spirits' aid. The rest of the fight is up to you.”

She grew silent, contemplating what would happen in the coming fight.

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In the other tribes, the birds' songs were heard by those who could understand them, and they all called council meetings to discuss what it meant.

The Horse, Red Mountain, Blue River, and Fast Deer tribes all decided to aid immediately. They believed in the birds' songs and would fiercely aid their longtime ally. There were a few voices in each council that didn't want to aid for various reasons, usually due to the oncoming winter, but the majority of the councils decided to help, and with it, the tribes would send their aid.

The Sky tribe decided that the songs must have been a trick, conjured by the Feather tribe to lure them in a trap, and staunchly refused to do anything with the Feather tribe, instead focusing on increasing their patrols, just in case the Feathers tried to surprise them.

The Blackwood tribe laughed at the Feather tribe's misery. They had been long time enemies of the Feathers, and would never aid them. Not only did they believe the singing of the birds to be true, but they celebrated the news with a feast that such ill had befallen their enemy.

Both the Sun and Black Stone tribes were not sure what to do. Their debate on whether to believe the message, and if they did so, whether to act on it, remained a debate for a couple days with constant arguments going back and forth.

## Chapter 5 – The Offering

The sun was in their eyes as He Who Howls and the others emerged from the trees at the western entrance to Red River City. It was early morning, and they were tired after walking through the

forest for the past few days, pulling their captives behind them the entire time. As they entered the edge of the city, the giant jaguar stopped – it clearly would not enter the city. He Who Howls paused and looked at the jaguar with annoyance before pulling Rainbow Feather off its back, forcing He Who Howls to pull Rainbow Feather behind him, who now had to walk on his own instead of riding the jaguar. The jaguar slowly walked back into the forest and disappeared behind some trees.

He Who Howls led the procession of fifty attackers and their 8 captives through the outer edges of the city along the winding, unkempt dirt roads in between all the shabbily built stone houses. Curious faces poked their heads out of windows or stood up while working on their fields to observe the group coming through. Some people were excited to see a friend or loved one coming back from the raid. Others expressed concern after searching for someone that they didn't immediately spot.

They arrived at the center of the city after a couple hours of walking and the roads became smoother, often with cobblestone. The buildings were nicer, more articulate, and were in much better condition than the buildings of the outer city. Rainbow Feather and the seven others were wide-eyed as they walked through the city. Never before had they even heard of a city of such size, its population was in the thousands, which far dwarfed over any of the tribes they had come into contact with. They kept subconsciously slowing down as they turned to look around and take in the surroundings which only brought the ire of their captors, pulling on their restraints and lurching them forward to fall back in unison with the rest of the group.

He Who Howls led the group to the base of the pyramid and looked around at his surroundings, observing the city, his warriors, and their captives. After a moment, he turned back around and started walking up the stairs, motioning for the others to follow. He Who Howls got to the top without any issues, but the rest of the group, who didn't regularly or had never made this climb, found it to be much more tiring. After reaching the top, He Who Howls waited for the rest to come up behind him. Looking away from the steps towards the empty throne, he knew they had finally reached the top of the stairs by the sounds of their footsteps and labored breathing.

The group was alone at the top of the pyramid, the Jaguar God was nowhere to be seen. Closely huddled together, the rest of the group was impatient and anxious for what awaited them. An hour passed as they simply stood there, waiting. Any time one of the captives tried to speak up and ask what was happening, they were hit on the head with the butt of a spear, quickly teaching them to not speak out. The air was filled with tension as they waited for any sign of what was to come. Another hour passed with everyone standing there, waiting, impatiently shifting their weight from one foot to another. The anticipation was making the captives nervous, but there wasn't anything they could do.

Finally, as the sun reached high noon, a shuffling was heard from behind the throne. From a set of stairs on the opposite side of the pyramid that only went halfway down the side to a doorway into the pyramid itself, the Jaguar God emerged. It paced up the stairs and walked around the throne to look at the group assembled at the top.

Most of the captors sighed a collective relief that the Jaguar God was finally here and their waiting could finally come to an end. The captives on the other hand gasped and shrank back at the sight of the colorfully dressed jaguar that approached them.

“Very well done, He Who Howls.” The Jaguar God glanced from the captives to whom it addressed.

“I hope you find it a suitable sacrifice for you.” He lowered his head in respectful submission.

The captives cast furtive glances between one-another. They spoke aa foreign language and they didn't understand what was being said.

The Jaguar God approached the group, and the captors moved aside to grant passage to their captives for the Jaguar God. It advanced towards the group and looked them over. The Jaguar God craned its head forward, sniffing each captive. As it moved down the lines of captives, it paused at Rainbow Feather, inspecting him extra carefully.

“I believe him to be the chief of their tribe.” He Who Howls offered.

“Yes, I can tell,” the Jaguar God purred. “You have done most well, He Who Howls.” Without inspecting the last few captives, the Jaguar God turned and approached He Who Howls. Its paw reach forward and caressed the side of He Who Howls' face, causing a chilling shiver to run down his back. The Jaguar God seemed to notice as a slight grin spread across its muzzle. “Go now, lock them up, and return at nightfall, and we shall celebrate your bountiful raid.” The Jaguar God removed his hand and returned to sit on the throne.

He Who Howls turned around and quickly nodded his head, indicating for the others to turn and descend the stairs. The group followed his orders and the captives were escorted down the stairs. While they were walking down, Maize Bringer approached He Who Howls with a question.

“What does the Jaguar God do inside the temple?” Maize Bringer though he Who Howls would be the most likely to know.

“I am not sure.” He thought it over for a second before continuing. “I believe he travels to and from the Underworld from inside the temple. I never see him travel elsewhere.”

“That's what I assumed. So you have never been inside yourself?”

“No, and I hope I never have to. He sometimes takes offerings in there. It is not a place I would want to visit, and neither should you.”

Maize Bringer grew quiet as they reached the bottom and escorted their captives to a stockade where they could bind their captives. Each of the eight captives was bound to a post by their shackles, and He Who Howls infused each of their bindings with more energy to strengthen them, preventing any escape.

“Remain here and ensure they don't escape,” he commanded the rest of the group. “I will return at nightfall, and we will return them to the top of the temple. Then you will be relieved of duty.” He Who Howls departed from the group to rest after the exhausting previous few days.

He shuffled back to his house and sat in the silence of his empty house, collecting his thoughts. He felt relieved to be back, but concerned about the growing requirements of the Jaguar God. His thoughts wandered, and he felt a small twang of sorrow for those that were about to be sacrificed. He would not want to be sacrificed to the Jaguar God. It was a fate that he almost had once...

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A few other warriors with ancestral powers walked in between the captives, occasionally infusing more energy into their bindings, preventing Rainbow Feather and Loud Crier from invoking any ancestral powers of their own and continually rendering them helpless. The other commoners with lighter arms stayed around the perimeter of the stockade, ready in case any prisoner should possibly

attempt an escape.

Not sure of their fate, one of the captives got the courage to speak up and present a question to the others.

“What is going to happen to us?” He mostly directed the question at Rainbow Feather, but everyone heard him, including one of their guards who promptly came over and slapped him on the back with the shaft of his spear. He cried out in pain and didn't continue speaking.

“I don't know,” Rainbow Feather softly admitted. Whenever another tribe raided another, any prisoners were usually incorporated into the tribe somehow. Being locked up like this was unusual, but it couldn't be good.

Rainbow Feather attempted to channel power from his ancestors into an explosion that would hopefully free them. He had tried it on the journey here, but the giant had somehow noticed and pummeled him, forcing him to give up. Now that the giant was gone, he tried once more. The power built up inside him, but he couldn't bring it to fruition, and it ended up exhausting him more than it should have. He admitted defeat to himself, these shackles of energy were limiting him too much.

He continued to attempt to channel energy, but each time, his bindings just left him more and more exhausted. He could feel the bindings weaken, but every time they did, one of the warriors came by and infused it with more energy, forcing him to start from the beginning again. He was about to muster all his strength into one last attempt when He Who Howls came back. It was twilight, and it was time to escort them back to the temple.

He Who Howls towered over everyone else with impatience. He barked a few orders and the others moved to remove their captives from the posts they were attached to and pulled and prodded their captives towards the temple again. As they neared the temple, the rhythmic banging of drums could be heard emanating from the summit of the temple. The beat was quick, almost compelling them to walk quicker to keep pace with the beat. Bum bu-dum. Bum ba-dum. Bum da-dum. It continued without pause and only got louder as they got closer to the temple. They climbed to the top of the temple, their heartbeats beating strong in their ears to the tune of its own beat, causing a crescendo of drumming to drown out all other sounds.

At the top of the temple, the captives and their escorts were greeted by a large gathering. The Jaguar God was sitting on the throne, the fire to the left of the altar reflecting off its eyes, greedy for the coming ceremony. Along the left edge of the clearing were half a dozen drummers, continuously slamming their wooden clubs on the massive drums in front of them. Bum bu-dum. Bum ba-dum. Bum da-dum. The bonfire in between the drummers and the altar cast a shadow from the altar onto the line of others standing to the right of it. For those that weren't covered by the shadow, the firelight reflected off their golden jewelry and their elaborately decorated jugs and bowls they held in their hands.

The Jaguar God stood up, and the drumming immediately ceased. He walked over in the ensuing silence and addressed He Who Howls and the rest of the group. “Come He Who Howls, Maize Bringer, and Golden Arrow. Let us celebrate this sacred occasion.” All three of the ones he addressed were the most successful warriors the Jaguar God commanded, and they were handed sacks of dried cactus. They knew the protocol and they handed out a small handful to everyone present except the captives.

Rainbow Feather and the others watched as the Jaguar God pawed a handful from a bowl next to its throne and started chewing on it. As he started chewing, so did everyone else who had been given

the dried cactus. Rainbow Feather and the others looked at each other, confused as to what was happening.

“Bring the first sacrifice!” The Jaguar God gleefully roared.

At his command, the drummers started beating the previous tune again. Bum bu-dum. The captives jumped at the sudden outbreak of drums after the momentary absence of music. Bum ba-dum. Bum da-dum.

The giant turned from the throne and the jaguar to face the captive. “Bring that one first!” He commanded of the people restraining one of the captives, pointing at the one to be sacrificed.

Those behind the selected sacrifice prodded him with their spears, forcing him forward. A meter away from the altar, He Who Howls reached out and grabbed the first sacrifice by his shirt and completely lifted him off the ground and then slammed his back down onto the altar, knocking the wind out of him and stunning him. He Who Howls reached to the left side of his belt and withdrew his obsidian short sword. As he unsheathed it, the blade of the sword erupted into flames, acting as an additional torch now that the sun had completely set. With one hard swing, he brought the sword down and sliced through the other's neck. His head rolled off the altar to land with a sickening thud on the stone floor, prompting a handful of servants from the right of the altar to run over to it and capture the blood flowing off the altar from the corpse, collecting the red liquid in their painted clay containers.

The servants took turns running over to the Jaguar God with their full containers. Kneeling before him, they lifted the containers above their heads so the Jaguar God could take it and ingest the contents. Life seemed to flood into the Jaguar God's eyes with every container they brought to it, and there was no signs to show that its stomach was filling, drinking each container quicker than the previous one.

The eyes of all members of the Feather tribe were wide with horror at what they were witnessing. These savages were actively drinking their blood! One of the other captives couldn't handle the idea of having his head cut off and attempted to resist, pushing back to get through their captors and to run down the stairs. His struggle was futile as there were too many people holding them still and a warrior stabbed him in the back with his spear, causing him to fall to his knees in pain.

The giant quickly approached the fallen captive and grabbed him by the arm, dragging him towards the altar. Upon reaching the altar, he swept the headless corpse off the altar, causing it to land on floor. Not wasting any time, he threw the other onto the altar and cut off his head in a similar fashion as the first. The servants came again, gathering the blood and delivering it to the Jaguar God.

The remaining six captives were transfixed. Resistance was futile, but to accept their fate would be to accept a brutal death. Rainbow Feather called upon every last strand of strength within him. He called upon the power of all their ancestors, all the spirits, everything possible to aid them in this struggle. The energy welled up inside him, searching for an escape. The energy binding his hands, and his powers, first crackled, then exploded in a small flash. Now free, an inferno of energy projected outwards from the hands of Rainbow Feather. He first directed his attention to the captors around them and to the servants gathering the blood to the right of the altar. The drummers stopped playing in their surprise while Rainbow Feather incinerated many servants and captors. Most of the captives remained bound by the others, but one managed to slip away in the madness and started leaping down the steps of the pyramid.

The Jaguar God let out a roar that shook the whole pyramid. With speed unlike any of them had seen, the Jaguar God leaped from its throne and skirted around the altar, reaching Rainbow Feather before he could inflict any more damage. The Jaguar God reached its left paw out, creating a black bubble in front of its paw which acted like a vacuum, sucking in all the energy that Rainbow Feather was funneling out of his hands. Rainbow Feather helplessly looked at the Jaguar God as his last ditch effort was being nullified. Rainbow Feather was exhausted, and he fell to his knees. The Jaguar God then channeled the energy it had just stolen from Rainbow Feather to bind Rainbow Feather with energy shackles again, ensuring that Rainbow Feather would not be able to escape this time. The remaining captors regained control of the four others while Maize Bringer walked to the edge of the temple. He summoned green energy around his hands which he then launched at the one who was fleeing down the steps, piercing his back and instantly killing him. He watched with satisfaction as the lifeless corpse rolled down the remaining steps to come to a rest at the base of the pyramid. Satisfied that there would be no more interruptions, the Jaguar God angrily resumed its spot on its throne.

With the captives under control again, the Jaguar God ordered for the ceremony to continue. Bum bu-dum. Bum ba-dum. Bum da-dum. Rainbow Feather weakly watched as the other four were rapidly brought to the table and beheaded like those before them. Their blood was collected and given to the Jaguar God, who greedily drank it all, growing stronger and more imposing with each gulp.

Still on his knees, the giant approached Rainbow Feather and picked him up, carrying him over to the altar. Rainbow Feather was thrown onto the altar, causing a splash from the blood that had pooled up. He looked behind the reflection of the bonfire and the burning sword into the empty and distant eyes of the giant towering over him. The Jaguar God's face came into focus as it left its throne to stand on the opposite side of the altar as the giant, both looking down at him. One's face was solemn, the other, ravenous.

The Jaguar God invoked a black aura of energy around its right paw and thrust it into Rainbow Feather's chest, causing his entire body to convulse. The Jaguar God kept its hand inside him for a few moments, watching the pain and horror in Rainbow Feather's eyes.

“You are no true spirit.” Rainbow Feather managed to meekly whisper with his last few breaths.

The Jaguar God smiled, revealing its rows of sharp teeth before violently pulling Rainbow Feather's heart out from his chest, leaving a cavern where it once was.

Just as Rainbow Feather's vision started to fade, the last thing he saw was the fire of the giant's sword coming down at him, removing his head from his own body.

He Who Howls looked down at the blood pouring out of his neck. The servants were immediately at work, capturing the red waterfall in their containers, bringing them to the Jaguar God. The cactus they had previously ingested was having an effect, and the lights from the fire and his sword were dancing around in swirling patterns. His sword distracted him, so he extinguished the fire around it and returned it to its sheath.

The Jaguar God held the heart up above its head, squeezing the blood out of it like a sponge into its mouth, purring with satisfaction. Satisfied with the tributes, the Jaguar God reached down and took the first jug of blood that came from Rainbow Feather from the servant offering it. Reaching across Rainbow Feather's corpse, the jug was pushed into He Who Howls' hands.

“Drink deeply, He Who Howls. You have earned it, and your life may be extended.” The Jaguar

God's eyes bore into him.

He Who Howls looked into the jug, observing the thick liquid swishing back and forth. Watching it made him tired, it was almost hypnotic in his altered state. He didn't really want to continue doing this, but he did as he was told for some reason, the alternative was too grim. Leaning his head back, he put the jug to his lips and let the warm, irony liquid cross over his tongue as he drank it. None of the others were offered any blood – none of the others' lives depended upon it.

A moment of euphoria passed through He Who Howls, a high of happiness that was incredibly rare in his life. As fast as the feeling came, it was replaced with a deep sadness that brought tears to his eyes. It was an incredible blessing and a curse whenever the Jaguar God gifted him with a part of the sacrifice. Absolute bliss and then utter bleakness, both for only a moment before returning to his perpetual state of emptiness and confusion. He mindlessly looked around at those gathered around him, at the corpses on and besides the altar, at his own body.

The ceremony was over, and the drums slowed down until they stopped. The cactus was affecting everyone, causing their vision to blur and lights to splay out in beautiful patterns. Some stayed out to observe the stars and moon, while others walked around through the torch-lit city, high on the festivities.

He Who Howls felt empty and tired, and he wanted to go to sleep more than anything else. He made his way home and laid alone in his bed. He didn't use to always sleep by himself, but he couldn't quite correctly remember who he used to share a bed with. He laid awake, feeling emptier than ever, if it was even possible, before finally drifting off to sleep.

## Chapter 6 – The Coalition

It had been three nights since the Great Spirit had promised of the arrival of their allies. Soft Foot and the others were anxiously waiting in their camp to see if his prophecy would turn out to be true. Their camp was much smaller than it was before the attack, having consolidated into the remaining standing tents. They had buried their dead and were now keeping warm by standing by a bonfire made from the rubble leftover from the battle.

A soft thunder broke the apprehensive stillness of the morning. Soft Foot and the others looked up to the source of the sound. The noise got louder and several dozen riders on horseback came through the treeline into the camp. The Horse tribe had arrived. Black Moon and several others let out whoops of joy and ran out to greet them. Soft Foot smiled to herself, thinking they might yet have a chance. She ran after the others to the approaching Horse tribe.

As she got closer, she spotted their chief, Running Cloud, at the front. “Running Cloud, it is a relief to see your tribe join us,” Soft Foot called out to her.

Running Cloud looked at the ruined camp and then looked back at Soft Foot. “So the birds' songs were true. I am sorry. Where is your father, Rainbow Feather?”

Soft Foot averted her eyes, looking at the ground. “He was taken away.”

Running Cloud grew quiet. “I see. Again, I am sorry to hear that.” She reached down and put her hand on top of Soft Foot's head, trying to console her. “Let us drop our stuff off, it was a bit of a ride to get here.”

“Of course, let me show you where to set up your tents.” She led the Horse tribe back to their camp

and pointed to one side, where they proceeded to set up tents for the night.

After they had settled, Running Cloud approached Soft Foot. "Who else is coming?"

"I am not sure," Soft Foot admitted. "The Great Spirit sent out a message to all the surrounding tribes. I don't know who will heed the call like you did."

"I am sure more will come, we will just have to wait."

Soft Foot grunted her agreement before leaving her to attend to other matters in the camp.

Several other tribes arrived at their camp throughout the day. The Red Mountain tribe led by Tall Tree were the next to come. They were followed by Warm Smile, leading the Blue River tribe. She Who Cries rode in on horseback with the Fast Deer tribe. As it was getting later in the day, the last to arrive was the Black Stones, led by Big Heart.

More than 150 warriors had joined the Feather tribe, making it the biggest war party any of them had ever seen. The other tribes were camped around the Feather tribe's meager camp, and the chiefs of each tribe had all gathered during the waning twilight for a council meeting of the chiefs.

In the absence of Rainbow Feather, both Soft Foot and White Bear joined in the meeting. In addition to those two, sitting around the fire in White Bear's tent was Running Cloud, Tall Tree, Warm Smile, She Who Cries, and Big Heart.

"I thank you all for coming," Soft Foot started off the meeting. "You have all heard the birds' songs, and I can verify the truth of the matter. We were attacked a few nights ago by a powerful enemy that raided us and took some prisoners including Rainbow Feather, my father."

"He is a good man." Warm Smile offered. "Do you know if he is still alive?"

"I am not sure, but we will soon find out!" She tried to instill some enthusiasm in the others, which did seem to have its intended effect as several of them nodded their support.

"There are many of us," Big Heart began, "But what of the other tribes?"

Running Cloud let out an honest laugh. "The Blackwoods would rather die than ever help either of our tribes."

Big Heart only let out an understanding grunt.

"What about the Sun and Sky tribes?" Tall Tree asked. "They are both in the area."

White Bear cleared her throat, eager to contribute. "We have never really been on great terms with either of those tribes either." She paused to glance at Soft Foot for confirmation, who knowingly nodded her agreement. "It wouldn't surprise us if they didn't show up," White Bear finished.

The mood grew a little grimmer after her statement, and Warm Smile tried to lift the atmosphere. "It doesn't matter, we number almost two hundred warriors, no enemy will stand a chance against us!"

Quiet up until this point, She Who Cries still wasn't certain. "And how exactly do we find this enemy of yours?"

“After the birds flew to you all, I presented the same question to the Great Spirit.” Soft Foot paused to decide on how to best explain it. “He assured me that the spirits of various animals would be there, guiding us through the forest to our enemy's location.”

She Who Cries was still not entirely satisfied. “Where is the Great Spirit now?”

“He left later that day, but he assured me that he was watching over us.”

Tall Tree cut their discussion short, hoping to avoid any conflict between the two. “We have the numbers, and we have our guide. The spirits and ancestors are with us. We must have a war dance to prepare for our war path! Let's go outside and dance for our ancestors and the spirits so that they will be with us in the upcoming battle.”

The others mumbled their agreement and everyone filed out of the tent. Tall Tree seemed to be the most excited out of the group, and after exiting the tent, he bellowed out in excitement to the entire camp, “In the morning, we march for war!”

The entire camp erupted in excited cheers and whoops. More wood was added to the bonfire, making it large enough to light up the whole camp. Drums were brought out and beat in a frenzy while others danced around the fire in a celebration that everyone participated in. They madly drummed, ensuring all the spirits and ancestors would hear them. They danced passionately, wildly jumping and twisting around the fire while wearing colorful ceremonial masks, all the while asking their ancestors and the spirits for strength and protection in the coming battle. Soft Foot herself had adorned a mask and was leaping and spinning around the fire, hoping the spirits and ancestors would help them achieve victory. Her sweat soaked her clothes as she danced next to the blazing fire, her eyes stung as sweat rolled into her eyes, half blinding her, but she continued dancing, drunk on excitement.

The dancing and drumming continued for hours, everyone moving in a chaotic swirl of bodies for their ancestors and the spirits. The dancing started off random, with no defined formation or choreography. As the celebration wore on throughout the night, the dancers, as if guided by an unseen force, started dancing in specific patterns, forming lines, curves, and other shapes. With their feet shuffling in the dirt, they etched out various shapes in the ground that were so big, they could only be seen by the spirits in the sky.

The group had danced a design into the ground, kicking their feet along a certain path to yield a recognizable shape in the ground. Those with ancestral powers summoned energy to themselves and imbued the giant drawing with their energy, causing the lines to glow in the darkness. A giant elk was visible from the nearby hills and from the sky. Compelled again by the unseen force, they danced into another area and made another drawing in the ground, and then finally a third one, surrounding their camp with 3 giant drawings that glowed in the night.

It was well after midnight when they finally finished dancing. Satisfied that the spirits and their ancestors had heard their pleas, the drumming faded and they removed their masks. They had asked for as much help as they were going to get, and they needed to rest for the upcoming march. All the warriors who were to leave in the morning drank as much water as they could handle, not only to quench their thirst after dancing for so long, but to also make sure that they had to pee in the morning, acting as a natural alarm clock.

Soft Foot and Sleeping Wolf went back to their tent and immediately fell asleep, exhausted after all their movement.

Soft Foot had an odd dream that night. She wasn't not dreaming, but she simply dreamed of darkness. Darkness all around her. It was all she could feel, see, or hear. No matter where she ran, the darkness was all around her. She got scared and stopped, huddling into a ball, unsure of what to do. As she sat there, growing more afraid of the surrounding darkness, she heard footsteps behind her. The Great Spirit was standing behind her, she knew it without even turning around to look, she could tell it was him by his comforting presence.

"I am scared." She sought comfort from him.

"I know my child." His words relaxed her, somehow making the darkness more bearable. "In your darkest moment, remember your family. Remember their love."

Confused, she wanted to ask what he exactly meant, but she was woken up by Sleeping Wolf's gentle shaking.

"Wake up Soft Foot, it is time to go."

She continued laying there for a moment, trying to remember her dream. It was cryptic, and like dreams often do, the particulars of her dream were rapidly forgotten, leaving only a murky memory of itself behind.

She finally rose, grabbing her stuff: a water bladder, food, her bow and arrow, dagger, lance, and her father's tomahawk. She put her wooden breastplate on and looked at Sleeping Wolf. He already had his pack ready and was also ready with a backpack of supplies, a bow and arrow, dagger, and a spear. They needed all the able bodies they could get, and only kids and the elderly would be left behind. They both looked over at Long Legs and Little One, both of whom were still sleeping so they opted to leave the tent without waking them up.

Outside, the majority of the camp was abuzz, packing up their tents and preparing their horse if they had any. Forming at the eastern edge of camp, Soft Foot mounted her horse to look over the small army before them. *We are coming to get you father.* She thought to herself. Not wanting to wake the few that remained behind, she silently turned her horse and led the army into the woods, towards the waxing sunlight, towards the path of war.

The Great Spirit watched them assemble in the morning from his perch atop the hill to the south of the camp. As they marched into the forest, he glanced back at the three drawings they had made while dancing in the ground the night before. An elk, cougar, and a bear looked back at him from the valley floor.

"May the spirits be with you, and may your ancestors protect you."

## Chapter 7 – The War Path

It was not long after they had been marching through the woods that an elk made itself apparent in front of the group. It kept moving away from the group, but continuously pausing before getting out of sight so the group could keep an eye on it. Soft Foot and the others exchanged understanding glances. This was the guide that the Great Spirit spoke of. They continued walking through the woods, following the elk's guidance.

The further they got into the woods, the more they noticed other animals around them. More elk were seen in the distance to either side of them, building up in numbers around them, eventually outnumbering the coalition of people themselves. There were not only elk; some of the warriors in

the back of the group noticed that there were other animals trailing after them. A few cougars and even a couple grizzly bears started lumbering behind the group. This unnerved those at the rear of the group, they expressed concern to those around them, resulting in the chiefs at the front of the caravan getting word.

Soft Foot rode her horse to the back to investigate. Upon reaching the end, she too saw the cougars and bears trailing after their group. That was not normal behavior for either species, and she knew it to be the result of the Great Spirit's intervention.

“Everything is alright, they march with us. Consider them to be one of us!” she reassured the others around her. Considering that to be satisfactory, she galloped ahead and resumed her spot at the front of the column.

The first couple days passed without any incidents, and they made camp on the second night in the forest with different groups taking watch throughout the night while the other animals slumbered away from the camp.

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In Red River City, the Jaguar God stood upon the temple, looking to the west. Something was coming, it had a sixth sense for it. The Jaguar God paused to observe the heavens, reading the messages in the stars. Sensing the trouble, a runner was summoned.

“Bring me He Who Howls,” the Jaguar God commanded.

The runner didn't bother arguing that it was already late at night and instead ran away wordlessly towards He Who Howls' house. The runner found him sitting outside, already looking at the stars.

“The Jaguar God has summoned you.” He gave the order and quickly backed out of the house before anything more could be said.

He Who Howls sighed deeply. He knew why he was being summoned, he had seen it in the skies himself. He had half hoped that it would happen without the Jaguar God's foresight. Groaning, he stood up and walked towards the pyramid at the city center and climbed up it.

He found the Jaguar God standing at the edge of the temple, still looking to the west.

“You summoned me?”

“Yes. Come here and stand besides me.”

He Who Howls did as he was told, standing at the Jaguar God's side.

“What do the heavens tell you?” the Jaguar God asked of him.

He Who Howls took a few minutes and tried to make it look like he was studying the sky for the first time tonight. “It appears that something is coming... something from the west.”

The Jaguar God let out a mild grunt as he considered He Who Howls from the side. “It appears that your expedition has caused more ire than we anticipated. I want you to stay in the city, but form a militia to intercept them in the woods, I will send my jaguars to assist them when they attack these invaders of ours.”

“They won't enter the city.” He remained there for a moment, but when it was clear that the Jaguar God had nothing more to say, he turned to walk down the stairs.

Without turning around, right as He Who Howls took the first step down the steps, the Jaguar God called out, forcing him to stop and turn. “Don't forget what awaits you should your life end. I made you stronger, and you are my loyal subject, in this world, or any other.”

He Who Howls remained looked at the Jaguar God's back for a few moments before turning around and continuing down the steps to raise a militia that would set out first thing in the morning.

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Soft Foot awoke to the buzz of the camp. It was early morning, and frost covered the ground. It was getting colder every day. She got up and joined the others in packing up their camp, resuming their march through the forest.

Several hours passed as they marched and they were getting close, Soft Foot could sense it, but she also sensed something else. Danger was approaching them, faster than it should have been. She invoked the powers of her ancestors and her eyes glowed turquoise, allowing her to perceive more around them. She saw the guiding elk in front of them stop and the other animals surrounding them get more tense. She sensed more cougars in front of them, approaching them. One of the cougars attacked the elk, bringing it down. They weren't cougars in front of them she realized, they were jaguars! With that realization came a shower of darts flung by atlatls at their band.

“We are under attack!” Tall Tree shouted a warning.

Soft foot gathered her thoughts, pulling energy into herself before stretching her hands towards the air, shooting out streams of energy that vaporized many of the darts in midair. Looking around to gauge their enemies, a green needle of energy burst through the air, striking her in the shoulder and knocking her off her horse.

“Are you alright?!” Sleeping Wolf rushed to her side, helping her up.

“Yes, it just stings a bit.” She got to her feet, grabbing her bow and withdrawing an arrow. She notched it and launched it into the enemies. Whoops and yelps surrounded them as her companions charged to meet the rushing foes. Screams rang out as darts and arrows penetrated people on either side. The 12 jaguars she had previously sensed had also finally entered the battle, tearing into them, biting the throats of humans and horses alike, instantly crushing them. They were accompanied by the giant jaguar she had seen carry her father away, and it was swatting elk away with each powerful swing of its paw. The cougars that had been following them rushed through the disorganized ranks of the coalition to counter attack and fight the jaguars. The elks finally joined the fray and attacked the enemies from the sides by charging them and impaling some of them with their antlers. The elks didn't have the raw killing instinct that the cougars, or humans, did, but they proved an excellent distraction nonetheless.

The coalition members rushed in as well. Most of them were focused on fighting their attackers or defending against the rain of energy and darts. A few tried to take on the multiple jaguars, and a couple with ancestral powers, including Big Heart, rushed to take on the giant jaguar that was far too easily killing elk and humans with its powerful claws.

Soft foot was disorientated, having taken a blow and with enemies coming from the front and

animals rushing from behind them, she didn't know what to do. A massive green ball of energy was hurled into the midst of the coalition, causing an explosion that killed many and threw many more to the side, including Soft Foot.

Five lumbering bears charged through the smoke the explosion caused, now intent on attacking the enemies. Soft Foot stood up and shook her head, trying to clear her vision and stop the ringing in her ears. Her bow was broken so she discarded it and picked up her lance. As one of the bears ran past, she took a leap of faith, hoping that they were devoted to their cause and sprang onto the back of the bear. The bear seemed either to understand or not care and it continued charging forward with its new passenger. Soft Foot nudged her left heel into the bear's side, compelling it to turn into the direction of the ball of green energy's origin. There she found him, dressed in colorful cotton armor and adorned with golden jewelry, he was the one throwing energy into her army. He was surrounded by a contingent of guards who tried to throw darts at the approaching bear and rider. As their darts sailed through the air at her and her mount, Soft Foot shot out streams of turquoise energy, vaporizing most darts before they could reach them. The few darts that got through her defense struck the bear, only to further enrage it. It charged forward, knocking the guards to the side like bowling pins and then started mauling the nearest guard that resisted. Soft Foot remained on top of the bear, striking a few remaining guards with her lance. The bear then started charging the one in gold who had been throwing green energy. As the bear charged him, he concentrated his powers and shot a dart of energy through the bear, causing it to fall to the ground, bucking Soft Foot forward and causing her to lose her grip on her lance. She landed in a roll on the ground, straight towards the man in gold who was preparing more green energy in his hands. She came out of the roll and leaped at him with her tomahawk, glowing with turquoise energy, in her hand and drove it into his stomach. He coughed up blood as the green energy surrounding his hands slowly dissipated. Withdrawing her tomahawk from his stomach, Soft Foot watched as he fell to the ground.

She looked around to find herself fairly removed from the battlefield. A few cougars chased a jaguar off into the distance, and the remaining attackers seemed to be retreating with the Horse tribe in pursuit, cutting them down. She saw a few dead from her tribe and from other tribes, but the number of dead opponents far outnumbered their dead. She was overjoyed to see the corpse of the giant jaguar through the trees. It appears that their coalition had been underestimated and a group of only fifty or so enemies had attacked them, all of which had been dealt with or were being actively chased down.

Soft Foot approached the bulk of their troops and tried to assess the damage. A few horses were lost, some supplies destroyed, and a couple dozen dead. Soft Foot sat down with her back resting against a tree, finally admitting the pain in her shoulder which had been badly burned, which she now grasped. One of the council members from the Fast Deer tribes approached her and squatted next to her. Her eyes turned the color of a rose, followed in turn by her hands glowing the same color. She reached her hands out and placed them on Soft Foot's stricken shoulder, closing off the wound and numbing the pain.

“Thank you very much,” Soft Foot graciously let out a deep breath. “I don't know how I managed to fight as well as I did with that wounds” She looked at her shoulder, admiring the other's handiwork before resting her head against the tree. After only a few seconds of rest, Warm Smile approached her with anything but a smile on his face.

“Soft Foot, I am sorry.” She looked up at him after he addressed her. “Sleeping Wolf,” he paused, looking away, “Is dead.”

She didn't say anything at first. Lowering her head, she clenched her previously wounded shoulder as tears carved paths on her dirt-encrusted face. “I am so exhausted... It has been nothing but death

lately.”

Warm Smile remained silent, unsure how to console her.

She struggled to get up, still looking at the ground. “Take me to him.”

He complied, leading her to where he lay, a dart sticking out of his chest. Black Moon was kneeling next to him, and he looked at her with sympathy as she knelt on the other side of Sleeping Wolf, caressing his face.

She Who Cries was standing nearby. Partially directed at Soft Foot, partially to herself, she mumbled, “We should have never come here. We are on a fool's quest.”

Soft Foot inhaled deeply, composing herself as she wiped the tears off her face. “We already have come this far and have wiped out their attack party.” She raised her voice enough so all those around her could hear. “We will bury the dead and ensure they can join our ancestors and continue marching in the morning. I want double watches tonight!”

They busied themselves with rummaging through the remains of the battlefield before continuing for another couple hours to distance themselves from the buried dead. Exhausted, they set up camp and prepared for the night.

Soft Foot slept alone that night. Her husband was now dead, and she was filled with more conviction than ever to rain revenge upon those who had destroyed her life.

She woke up the next morning to the crunch of someone's footsteps on the morning frost outside her tent.

“Soft Foot, wake up!” Running Cloud sternly called from outside.

Fearing another attack, she grabbed her tomahawk and dagger and stepped outside. “What is it?” Her eyes darted around looking for danger. Running Cloud's calm, but serious stance made her shift her focus to her.

“The Fast Deer are gone.” She indicated toward an empty corner of the camp where they had been the previous night. Bitterness rose in her voice. “It appears they snuck away in the night.”

A flash of anger crossed Soft Foot's eyes. “We will continue without them.”

Running Cloud wanted to protest, but if they turned around now, everything would have been for nothing. She turned around to gather her things and Soft Foot did the same. After a few minutes, the camp was ready to depart, and they marched on in silence for a few hours towards the east. As they resumed their march, the remaining elks continued flanking their sides and the last couple remaining cougars and bear stalked them. Morale was low after the losses from the previous day and from the Fast Deer tribe departing in the night.

Soft Foot was filled with anger, and she was starting to trust the other tribes less. They needed to get to their destination before anyone else decided to turn tail and run. She marched them at a quicker pace than before, intent on covering as much ground as quickly as possible by following the new elk that was guiding them at a grueling rate.

By mid-afternoon, the forest started thinning and they could see much further out. There was still no

enemy sightings, but they remained on high alert. Their shadows were growing longer as the sun started to approach the horizon behind them. They were guided onto a small foot path through the woods which they started walking on to make the march easier which eventually developed into a dirt road. They started seeing a few random people, but they were not armed for combat and would run away at the sight of the coalition. Smoke was spotted in the distance and they stopped to ponder what it was. Was it a forest fire? It was more smoke than a normal camp would emit. Soft Foot pressed them to push forward, they would find out soon enough.

They noticed that the animals stopped walking with them. The elks, cougar, and bear had all stopped and were letting the coalition proceed without them. Soft Foot wasn't sure what that meant until they made a turn on the road to find the source of the smoke they had previously spotted: a sprawling metropolis of buildings. They stopped in their tracks at the size of it, unable to believe that it spread across the entire valley. Stone houses as far as they could see, and in the center of it, a giant stone pyramid jutting out towards the sky. They had just shy of 150 people at this point. This city looked big enough to contain a few thousand inhabitants.

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The Jaguar God was standing on top of the pyramid with He Who Howls, Golden Arrow, and a few other warriors. They squinted into the sunlight at the approaching army.

A growl rumbled from the Jaguar God's throat. "It seems our enemy was stronger than we anticipated." The Jaguar God glared at the others. "Arm everyone, I don't want them reaching this far."

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"What do we do?" Tall Tree asked, looking between the city and the others. "I was prepared for another tribe. But this, this is too much." He glanced back at the animals that remained behind in the forest to further make his point that they didn't have adequate numbers.

"Everyone we chased down on the way here posed us no threat." Running Cloud offered. "I don't think they are expecting us. What would our ancestors think if we tucked our tails between our legs and ran away, now that we are finally here?"

Soft Foot spoke loudly so everyone could hear her. "I will defend us with the powers of all of our ancestors. They are ill-prepared, and we attack now!" Pointing at the pyramid, "Their chief must be there! That is our target, let's go!" She let out a whoop and ran forward. Black Moon echoed her whooping, running after her, followed by the entire band running into the city, whooping, yelling, shooting arrows and throwing explosions of energy around them. With no real walls to speak of, the coalition ran into the city with relative ease, shooting their bow and arrows and throwing energy at anything in their path.

The commoners at the edge of the city were taken by surprise by the shouting and explosions rocking their houses. A few attempted to stand up and return fire by throwing darts at the invaders, but the darts were neutralized by Soft Foot or another invoking powers to defend them. Those that stayed in place long enough were quickly cut down by the thundering stampede of the coalition penetrating the city. Screams filled the smoky air as people ran out of their houses across the fields, seeking refuge at the city center where the Jaguar God would be with its finest warriors.

Soft Foot's glowing turquoise eyes scanned the streets, looking for enemies to attack as they pushed further into the city. Armed with only her dagger and tomahawk, she opted to project streams of

turquoise energy into any crevice she thought the defenders might be hiding in. Geysers of explosions erupted around her as the energy from her hands struck the buildings and unfortunate inhabitants who stayed in one place long enough for her to direct her anger at.

With Soft Foot's indiscriminate attacks, the defenders rapidly retreated in fear, inviting the coalition further into the unprotected city. Soft Foot and the others advanced for more than an hour, facing tiny pockets of resistance at best that were swiftly crushed. Soft Foot's frequency of throwing energy against any possible target was lowering, the intensity of each attack decreasing – her continuous barrage of attacks were starting to wear her down. A couple of the defenders managed to get darts past her attacks and sloppy defense, wounding one member of Feather tribe and killing a Black Stone member.

Warm Smile was cautiously walking behind her with Black Moon, whom he quietly addressed.

“I fear her outbursts are taking their toll on her. I don't think she has much strength left in her.”

“Her thirst for revenge is strong,” Black Moon reluctantly agreed.

Despite their attempt at going unheard, she seethed through her gritted teeth at them, “I will kill one hundred men for each one person they took from me!”

“Soft Foot! Please!” Black Moon pleaded. “You need to keep your head clear, you are wasting your energy.”

She shrugged off his plea, pushing further into the city with the others following behind her. The road was slowly becoming more structured, the buildings nicer – they were only a few hundred meters away from the pyramid.

She stopped, her shadow reaching out in front of her. The sinking sun cast a fiendish orange glow on the rows of defenders that had finally assembled into one force. The wall of humans worked its way across the entire road and snaked its way around the buildings to either side of the road. The front row looked down their spears towards the invaders while the rows of defenders behind them loaded darts into their atlatls.

The two forces paused to consider each other. One force numbered just over one hundred; the other, over 1000. Soft Foot and her companions were exhausted, but they were ready to fight till the death. The defenders were fueled with anger at the invaders who threatened their livelihood, but flashes of fear could also be seen in their eyes. Most of the defenders were not warriors, most of them had just been working on the fields prior to being attacked.

Energy started to form around the hands of some of the defenders' hand as they collected their energy to attack. Soft Foot did the same, followed by her companions that could do so. The air crackled with energy, causing those without the ability to call upon their ancestral powers to cautiously hunch down in respectable fear.

“Prepare to defend us.” Soft Foot commanded of those within earshot. She then screamed, rapidly pulling in the powers of her ancestors before pointing each of her palms to either side of the street. Still screaming, a loud crack of thunder boomed as she funneled her energy into two separate beams of turquoise energy aimed at the defenders and rapidly moving the beams' paths to the middle of the defenders. The beams combined at the center of the road, culminating into an explosion that sent a few dozen defenders sprawling away from the blast. She acted with such quickness and ferocity that none of the defenders had time to react, allowing her to burn and explode dozens of the defenders in

one attack.

Shaken into action, the defenders that were still standing after her initial attack quickly reacted. Those with energy prepared started throwing balls and darts of energy into the attackers while atlats were swung to release a rain of darts onto the coalition's shields of energy.

Running Cloud, Warm Smile, and the others around Soft Foot had prepared their energy in the form of arcing curves in front of them, protecting them from the enemy's counterattack by nullifying incoming energy or disintegrating any incoming darts. A return of arrows from behind Soft Foot slid through the energy shields in front of them, striking down a few defenders. The center line of defenders, ravaged by Soft Foot's explosion and the arrows, buckled and backed away, allowing Soft Foot and the others to force their way further into the city.

Too eager in their quest to advance, Soft Foot moved their group in with enemies to either side, effectively flanking themselves. In addition, the sun had finally crept behind the mountain, casting the valley in twilight. Other than the crackles of energy and explosions caused by its impact, it became harder to see in the waning light. Under cover of the fading light, the defenders to either side of their wedge moved in and around, encircling and trapping the coalition. They were circled too quickly and those protecting the coalition with their shields didn't have enough time to reposition themselves effectively. Hidden by the weak light, darts screamed through gaps in the shields of energy and easily pierced their thin leather armor, eliminating a couple-dozen of the tribe members in a well-timed attack.

Soft Foot was light-headed after her powerful outburst, but she still attempted to guide the others. "Regroup and defend against their attacks!" She commanded before leaning on Black Moon for support. The others formed up more effectively, projecting shields around them that stopped almost all the other's attacks as the defenders uselessly pelted the ring of energy surrounding the coalition.

They became a siege weapon, rumbling through the city and casting aside all attacks. They released arrows from withing and streams of energy to strike others as they moved closer to the temple. A few lucky shots managed to get through their shield, killing Tall Tree and a few others around Soft Foot, who was starting to recover from her previous attack. Like oil sliding across water, they waded deeper through the throng of defenders to finally arrive at the base of the pyramid with less than half their original numbers remaining.

A stone clearing on the ground, ten meters in diameter, lay before them. It was devoid except for a single imposing figure, taller than anyone else. A black rune in the shape of a jaguar glowed on his coned head. He stood alone, nobody else around the ring dared to enter. Waiting patiently with nothing but his armor and his sword at his side, he considered the approaching horde before releasing the same shrill howl he let out when they first attacked the Feather tribe in the morning, several days prior.

"I will tear him apart!" Soft Foot spat as she yelled, recognizing his howl and the mark on his head. She took off, leaving Black Moon and the others behind and ran through the wall of energy to enter the isolated ring. With her tomahawk in her right hand and her dagger in her left, she encased both of the weapons with turquoise energy.

As she landed in the ring, He Who Howls grinned with anticipation as he handled his obsidian sword, encasing the blade with fire as he withdrew it from its sheath.

Although they couldn't understand each other, He Who Howls let out a bellowing taunt. "Now you die!" He then immediately rushed her and swung his sword in a sweeping arc in front of him.

Soft Foot reacted quickly and ducked under his attack and rolled to the side, coming out of the roll with enough time to raise her tomahawk above her head to stop the downward swinging slash he followed through with. She stumbled backward, shaking embers off of her shirt that had flung off of his sword when it hit her tomahawk. Despite his enormous size, he was quicker than she expected and he was putting her on the defensive side of their duel. Calling upon the power of her ancestors, she asked for their strength and speed. Her eyes flashed and her movements became quicker. She whipped her left hand in his direction, launching a small ball of energy at him while she backpedaled to gain some room to maneuver.

He Who Howls put his left hand out in front of him, as if signaling for her turquoise ball to stop. The ball reached his hand and promptly disappeared instead of exploding. Soft Foot's brows furrowed after seeing that, unsure what to make of it. He Who Howls then clenched his fist, as if he was crushing her previous attack. He stretched his hand out in front of him, opening his palm again and releasing a torrent of fire.

Acting quickly, Soft Foot put up a shield on front of her as the fire reached her, preventing the brunt of the attack and only singeing her. She sidestepped, hoping to get to a different vantage point but He Who Howls kept pivoting and redirecting his flamethrower of energy at her. It became a waiting game as he wore down her defenses with her pinned. Sensing that she would break before he let up, Soft Foot pushed her shield outwards and ran to the side, invoking more energy as she did. While running, she directed a stream of turquoise energy at the ground in front of his feet instead of directly at him.

An eruption of stone erupted from the ground in front of He Who Howls, temporarily blinding him with the rubble. Unable to see, her trick bought her enough time to run to his right side and approach close enough to finally attack him. She laboriously breathed as she strained to close the distance between them, her feet stomping on the stone as she closed in on him. She moved to strike him with her tomahawk but she was taken by surprise as a fiery arc swung out to his side, striking her in the chest with his sword and knocking her backwards to land on her back.

Her wooden breastplate had prevented the sword from cutting her in half, but the flames had caused it to catch on fire. Struggling to breath after the impact of his sword, she frantically removed the burning breastplate and cast it aside, causing it to cast additional light on their battle.

The dust started to settle around He Who Howls, and he turned to find her sitting on the ground. Wiping the debris from his eyes, he wasted no time in approaching her and bringing down his sword in another arc, intending to cut her in half.

Looking at the sword coming for her head, she threw a blast of energy to her left which resulted in a minor explosion that threw her to the right, out of the sword's path. Rolling out of her tricky maneuver, she stood up only to find an incoming thrust of He Who Howls' sword. Frustrated at his constant barrage, she sidestepped his thrust. Intent on ending this before he wore her out any more, she quickly raised her tomahawk above her head. Mustering her strength, the head of the tomahawk grew brighter than ever and it screamed with energy as she brought it down on He Who Howls' outstretched arm from his previous thrust.

The head of her tomahawk struck his forearm with such force that it buckled him forward, causing him to stoop over. Soft Foot glanced down expecting to see his arm deeply cut, if not entirely removed, but there was no blood to be seen. Instead, she noticed that his arm, while not cut, was broken. His skin must have been protected by energy, but apparently the bones on the inside were still vulnerable, and her attack was strong enough to fracture his forearm into two.

He Who Howls curiously inspected his arm. He had never been wounded since the Jaguar God had gifted him with elevated powers. The pain was intense, but he was more in awe that he had actually gotten hurt for once and actually felt something.

They both remained motionless for a few seconds, staring at his broken arm. He Who Howls shifted his head slightly to look at Soft Foot in contemplative confusion. Startled by his slight movement, she reacted with more instinct than intention and plunged her glowing dagger into his eye.

He Who Howls' last thoughts were not of the battle he was engaged in or of Soft Foot, but rather the past with his wife, and the future that awaited him after this. His memories flooded back into him and he remembered his life growing up in the upper class in a nearby city that, while larger than Red River City, was much less aggressive than this one. They were raided by agents of the Jaguar God who brought him back, among others, as a sacrifice. The Jaguar God was a well-known underworld lord, and He Who Howls was terrified of leaving this world with his beautiful wife, and entering the lord's domain. He fought his captors at the sacrificial altar with such animosity that the Jaguar God took a liking to him. Granting him youth, powers, and the ability to remain in this world, he bestowed god-like powers on him, but corrupted his thoughts with anger towards others and with indifference for his old life. He was additionally bound by a pact that would doom his spirit for the Jaguar God's underworld should he ever manage to die. His wife was sacrificed regardless and his life became an existential hell, forcing him to serve for no reason other than his fear of what waited for him if he entered the underworld. Now he would finally find out which of these two Hells would be the worst one.

Soft foot removed her dagger from He Who Howls and he released a howl unlike any he had ever made before – one of hatred, anger, pain, and fear. Black energy oozed out of his pores, his spirit was ushered to the underworld, and his corpse fell over and hit the ground with a large thud.

## Chapter 8 – To Kill A God

Running Cloud had been intently watching their duel while keeping up her part of their wall to shield them from the constant barrage of attacks.

“She killed him!” She triumphantly called out to the others. She wanted to rush over and hug her, but they were still under attack and she had to uphold the wall of energy. Running Cloud watched as Soft Foot stepped away from the corpse at her feet, looking around at her surrounding. Soft Foot's head snapped to look at the stairs of the pyramid where a jaguar, walking on two legs and dressed in colorful clothing roared out some command.

“Stop!” The Jaguar God roared across the battlefield, slightly rumbling the entire valley.

All the defenders who had not stopped attacking the bubble of invaders immediately ceased their attack, casting an eerie silence over the poorly lit battlefield.

The Jaguar God finished descending the last few steps of the stairs and stepped off the pyramid before turning to face Soft Foot. Seeing the jaguar's non-human form and the presence it commanded, she instinctively knew it to be the true chief of this city. Still fueled by adrenaline and rage, she rushed the Jaguar God. Pulling in her strength, she invoked a blinding light in front of her and jumped to the side, hoping to have confused it. She swung her tomahawk into its side. Quicker than she could react, the Jaguar God met the head of the tomahawk with its paw, enclosing it and extinguishing the turquoise light around it before casting her weapon aside. It then swatted her stomach with its other paw, knocking the wind out of her. The Jaguar God left his paw in place and

a black glow emanated from its paw, draining Soft Foot of any last energy she had.

Soft Foot fell to her knees, exhausted and defeated, she helplessly looked up at the Jaguar Guard standing above her. The Jaguar God crouched down, its whiskers tickling her ear.

Softly purring, the Jaguar God spoke to her. "I am not your enemy my child."

The silent battlefield strained its ears to hear what was being said. Running Cloud, Black Moon and the others couldn't understand what the jaguar was saying to her, but they were all surprised when she responded as if she understood him.

"You are my enemy... you all killed my family! My entire tribe!" She wobbled back and forth in exhaustion.

"It was an accident, and one that you can fix." The Jaguar God was weaving its energy into her ears, confusing her.

"How could I fix it? Can you bring back my family's spirits from where they rest with our ancestors?"

"No, but you can seek revenge on those who have wronged you."

"But... that's why..." Something wasn't right, but she couldn't place what. She looked at the ground as she tried to remember why she was so angry at the Jaguar God.

"Yes. Your strength is unmatched, but your friends deserted you when you needed them the most."

"My friends?" She glanced at her coalition, who was intently watching her in turn.

The Jaguar God had almost succeeded in tricking her mind and discerning what it needed to know. "Not them. Your other friends. You had a mission, but the others abandoned you. The Sky, the Blackwood, the Sun. Yes, they all neglected you. The Fast Deer abandoned you in your weakest moment."

Soft Foot heard some faint whispers, urging words of caution. The voices were annoying her, like the buzzing of a fly, and she tried to ignore them. The whispers got louder, more adamant, trying to reason with her, but her anger at those who betrayed her was too much and she shut out all of the whispering.

Black Moon was horrified to hear Soft Foot accepting whatever the jaguar was purring into her ear.

"The Sky, the Blackwood, and the Sun neglected me. The Fast Deer abandoned me." Soft Foot hollowly confirmed.

Realizing what was happening, Black Foot yelled out to the others. "We have to stop them!" He rushed forward with the entire group following him, now realizing how the situation was developing.

Big Heart understood what was happening, and he planned to end it, even if it meant taking Soft Foot's life. While running with the others, he pulled energy into his hands, causing white balls to form. He coalesced it into a spiral of white energy directed at the two.

The Jaguar God put up a paw and deflected the blast into the crowds around then, inadvertently killing a few warriors. Scowling, it sprang to its feet, focusing on the group interrupting them. A black formation formed in the center of the coalition which was followed by a spire of stone that burst out of the ground, tossing the coalition in all directions. The Jaguar god then turned around and growled at Soft Foot who obediently repeated its message.

“Any who try to stop us are also enemies.”

In pain from being thrown by the stone spire, Black Moon watched helplessly as his lifelong friend was corrupted by this evil lord of the underworld and turned against them. He struggled to get up in order to make one more attempt at providing her with salvation, but he and the others were stopped by the rush of defenders that had advanced on them, pressing spears against their throats to hold them in place. He could only helplessly lay there and watch as she first stood up, and then knelt again in front of the Jaguar God. Its paw reached out and touched her head, causing a gale around the two, pitching debris in all directions. Black Moon closed his eyes against the rain of dirt, and when he opened them again, he could faintly see the glowing black rune of jaguar on her upper chest.

## Chapter 9

A rush of power entered Soft Foot. She felt younger, stronger, bigger, and quicker than ever. She looked down at her chest and observed the glowing black jaguar through the tatters in her tunic. She noticed in passing that the black rune matched her now black amulet that was hanging from her neck. She felt powerful, but hollow. She remembered her tribe, but it was muddled with thoughts of how the other tribes had abandoned her. She was filled with anger and wanted revenge against those that had let her down.

Still speaking to her so that she alone could understand, he gave his first order. “The recent attack on this city has been draining, and a new sacrifice is required. Go, you know where the Sun tribe is. Bring me back their chief and others for a sacrifice. This will be your first test. Take revenge on those that have made your life difficult.” The Jaguar God watched with satisfaction as her anger and hatred was successfully redirected to the other tribes. “Don't forget though, I can remove your powers at any time and immediately condemn you to the Underworld, where you will suffer eternal death. Don't fail me.”

“And what of the others?” She looked over at those still pinned down to the ground at spear-point.

The Jaguar God stepped in their direction, pondering their fate. “Will they join you in your mission? They have proven to be strong fighters so far. Or will they be a problem that we will have to remove?”

She stepped up behind him. When granting her additional powers, the Jaguar God had made it painfully clear what the underworld meant for her, and it terrified her to even consider going there. She had to do everything possible to avoid that fate, like He Who Howl ultimately met, but she also didn't want that fate to fall upon these people for some reason that she herself didn't understand. She was contemplating how to address them, to see if they would be loyal to her, unlike the others had been, when she noticed something odd.

Dangling off the back of Jaguar God's clothing was a feather. It was slightly red-stained from blood, but that feather was unmistakable. It was the feather that had been on her father's head. The Jaguar God had removed it and added his feather to its outfit in addition to other trophies dangling off its clothing.

A wave of memories of growing up with her father, their tribe, her friends, Sleeping Wolf, and everyone else that had been in her life up until the past few days rushed back into her. It all contrasted so much with the hatred she now felt towards all the others and her mind started to fracture. Rocked with grief and guilt, she knew what needed to be done.

She became the silent mover that she had been named for once more. She rushed forward without so much as an utterance of sound, gaining on the Jaguar God before it could realize how much distance she had closed between them. Summoning power from every spirit and ancestor that she could call upon, her eyes became beacons of turquoise light as she channeled all of the energy she could into the dagger she still held and thrust it into the Jaguar God's back.

Black Moon watched at the Jaguar God let out a roar of frustration and moved to turn around and face Soft Foot. As the Jaguar God started to turn, Soft Foot released a piercing scream that echoed throughout the valley. Her body itself became a conduit of energy, her entire body glowing a brilliant shade of turquoise. Her body itself was radiating energy, completely shredding her clothes and exploding her amulet in a flash of turquoise. Black Moon and the others put their hands in front of their eyes as her body grew brighter and brighter over a few seconds while her screaming shifted to a rumbling that vibrated the ground. She grew brighter and the rumbling became stronger for a few seconds. Black Moon felt like he was starting to get pulled into the light before he and everyone were pushed away by a violent, yet controlled explosion of turquoise energy.

Already laying on the ground, Black Moon didn't get pushed very far away. After regaining his senses, he propped himself up on his elbows, scanning for Soft Foot. The only thing where she and the Jaguar God had previously been was a small, charred crater. Both of them were nowhere to be seen.

Nobody was sure what to do, and everyone remained in stunned silence. *Did we win?* Black Moon wondered to himself. He was afraid to move in case the defenders retaliated.

The defenders surrounding the scene were also in shocked silence. What did this mean for them? Who would lead them now, and what would become of their city? Also unsure of what to do, everyone remained motionless for a few minutes, simply looking at each other, afraid to make the first move.

The stillness was broken by a lone horse riding up the road that the coalition had previously advanced upon. All of the defenders parted to the sides as the horse walked through them. With the Jaguar God gone, the Great Spirit could finally enter this land again and it approached the group on his horse.

“Come,” He commanded, “The Jaguar God is gone. Let's return to your families.”

Black Moon and the others slowly got up, cautiously assessing the surreal situation. “But where is Soft Foot?” He pressed.

“She has sent the underworld lord to its domain. Soft Foot had to sacrifice herself and banish herself there as well, but she did it to save us. To save our way of life.”

Black Moon and the others grew quiet, unsure what more to ask.

“Come, I will lead you back home.”

He turned around and led the coalition back the way they came, with the crowd parting around them. The inhabitants of the city looked at them with various emotions. Some were relieved to see them leaving, others angry and resentful at the damage and loss of life caused by them. After witnessing the battle, none dared to attack them though, and the remains of the coalition walked out through the city without any further incidents.

Without sleep, the group walked in contemplative silence for the entire night.

The rested at morning, and when they continued, the Great Spirit addressed the few dozen people following him. “The Jaguar God is gone. We can continue our way of life without fear by a malevolent lord. Our way of life has been preserved.” He remounted his horse and continued leading the group home

Black Moon walked besides the Great Spirit, curious for answers. “Who was the Jaguar God?” He still wasn't sure what they had just defeated.

“An underworld lord. This one made its way here and has been spreading its blight around this area for hundreds of years. Its hunger became too great, and it had to be removed from this world. It has been banished, but unfortunately Soft Foot had to sacrifice herself as well.”

“How can we rescue her?”

Black Moon kept walking, stumbling over a root on the path because of the tears in his eyes. The Great Spirit's silence revealed everything, and he remained silent for the remainder of the trip back home.

The other tribes departed after the recognizing where they were, leaving Black Moon, White Bear, and ten other survivors following the Great Spirit to the Feather tribe's camp. After arriving at their camp, they were greeted with a warm welcome and with crying about those that didn't return, making it a very bittersweet return.

Black Moon watched the Great Spirit walk away from the camp and disappear behind the trees in the forest. He turned around, looking at their camp. He would adopt Long Legs and Little one since both their parents died during the battle. Songs and dances would be made about Soft Foot's

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