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# A JAGUAR'S FIRE

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## Prologue

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### *Southern Forest, Healer Clan Village*

"AND SO IT was that Shadow Walkers came upon the land. They used to be human, but in the days of Great Sorrow a strange sickness robbed them of their humanity. It made them bitter shadows of themselves and they ended up turning on their own kind, like beasts of prey, with no recollection they'd been human before. The killing frenzy was upon them, until only the people of the Clans survived."

Raina let her mind wander for a while because the words were only too familiar. It was the story the people of her Clan often evoked since they believed in the healing power of storytelling. And so, every year on the Night of Those Who Remember, Raina's grandmother, Ayla Featherstone, Chief of the Southern Forest Healer Clan, sat on a dais in the middle of the Village Square and told the Tale of Sorrow to the whole Clan. How the people who'd survived had come to the Forest to seek refuge and first divided into Clans:

Warrior Clans who believed in the power of Animal Spirits, and Healer Clans, who clung to the memory of the Old World as it had been before the days of Great Sorrow.

“The Warrior Clans swore to protect everyone against the inhuman Shadow Walkers. The Healer Clans vowed to help cure those in need. And so we have to this day!” Raina’s grandmother intoned.

The strange sickness had claimed too many of the people in the world – a “pandemic”, to use one of those old words employed by the ancestors of the people of the Clans. The Shadow Sickness. Yet not all of those who were struck by the Shadow Sickness had turned into mindless creatures. Some who had fallen prey to the sickness had bodies strong enough to fight the illness, and they preserved their humanity. This was how Warriors and Healers had emerged. Warriors were those who’d recovered from the illness, and who retained the superhuman strength and sharpened, feral instincts which made Shadow Walkers so feared and deadly. Healers were those survivors who kept the Shadow Walkers’ uncommon ability to heal themselves, and who soon taught themselves to use it in order to cure others.

“But Warriors and Healers were only the lucky few,” Ayla Featherstone pointed out in a sorrowful voice.

Most people’s bodies had been unable to overcome the illness. They’d become mindless Shadow Walkers. Once they’d transitioned, there was no cure which could help them. And their feral rage had made them predators. Many of those who’d escaped the illness could not escape the Shadow Walkers’ killing rampage.

It had been so for more than two hundred years, until the Shadow Sickness began to subside, and the number of those who turned into mindless beasts began to dwindle. Shadow Walkers had nothing on their mind but killing and food. They did not breed among themselves. And in time, those

who were not destroyed by Warriors came to die of old age. Now only scattered groups of surviving Shadow Walkers still roamed the land, but they'd learned to keep away from large human settlements. They were no longer the scourge they'd been, and they would have eventually dwindled away, if some of the Warrior Clans had not become arrogant and power-hungry.

"So there came, seventy years ago, the Great Rift among Warrior Clans, who started to quarrel among themselves for lands and power," Raina's grandmother went on.

Raina closed her eyes in disgust at the Warriors' behavior, thanking Mother Nature she had been born into a Healer Clan. Healers did not mix with Warriors, because they disliked the Warriors' aggressive nature. Those who had become Warriors were feral and dominant. Besides, Raina thought with a wry smile, the territorial Warriors tended to be mostly male, while the nurturing Healers tended to be mostly female. There were exceptions, certainly, but female or mixed spirit Warriors were not that common. Neither were male or mixed spirit Healers. This didn't matter that much though. What mattered was that Healers and Warriors were different from one another and clung to their different ways.

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*Jaguar Territory*

The Warrior exhaled in deep pleasure as he plunged his engorged cock into his woman's slick sex. He revelled in her warm tightness as he began to love her rhythmically, and he grinned ferally as his hands took hold of her freshly spanked thighs. He had given her a spanking earlier and, just like her

bottom, her upper thighs were nice and red and hot, just as he liked them. His woman moaned under him, and he widened his feral grin, recalling her previous moans of mingled pleasure and pain as his big hand had been setting her plump bottom on fire. He lazily thought he would spank her again if she asked for it, and he already had an inkling she would be soon shamelessly asking for it, because she was a feisty woman who liked to be naughty. His grin turned into a smile of sheer tenderness. *His woman.* The woman who made his world whole and complete. He bent his head to kiss her full lips, but he suddenly realized he was simply kissing air. With a jolt, he came back to himself, and understood he'd had a dream, a hot, sensuous dream he could not quite recall. Dimly, he searched his mind for the face and body of the woman he'd held in his arms. But now he could not quite remember. With a frustrated sigh, he lay down again in the bed he'd made in the thick foliage of the forest and closed his eyes, willing himself to go back to sleep. Perhaps he would see the woman again in his sleep and touch her and thrust inside her and spank her again. Perhaps... But the next dream he had was very different from the hot one he'd had before. And soon the Warrior understood this dream was a Spirit-Dream.

The Warrior was dream-walking and in his Spirit-Dream he saw his guiding spirit, The Mighty Jaguar. *Guide me, Brother Jaguar,* the Warrior whispered, but the Jaguar just looked at him with a mischievous grin. The Warrior sighed within himself, recalling who he was in the real world and what had to be done. He had been born in a world already ravaged by destruction. He was one of those who'd survived. This was what his people had done for more than two hundred years—survive. And now it seemed to him that the war which was brewing among the Warrior Clans threatened to plunge their world back into chaos. His Clan, the Jaguar Clan was now at

war with the Tiger Clan. Tigers had to be stopped at all costs. They meant to bring destruction into a world that had barely started to heal.

*Guide me, Brother Jaguar. Speak to me.*

But the Jaguar was still silent, just looking at him with yellow, feral eyes which were a mirror of the Warrior's own eyes.

The Warrior pleaded. He'd made up his mind and there was no choice but to take the course he had settled upon. Jaguar Warriors would stand by the Southern Forest Healer Clan no matter what and protect them from the Tigers. His Clan would protect Healers at all costs. But so far, Warriors and Healers had always held themselves apart and did not know each other's ways. So the Warrior waited for a sign from the Jaguar, pleading with Him to say whether it was really right for Warriors to mingle with Healers.

The Jaguar laughed, showing his feral teeth. In the Warrior's dream, the Jaguar looked very human.

*You seek to put together what was broken long ago,* the Jaguar spoke.

*Yes, put together,* the Warrior muttered in awe of the Spirit deigning to speak to him. *Is it right?*

There could be no other way, the Warrior reasoned. The Treaty between his people and those of the Healer Clan was needed to hold evil at bay, and his Clan would have to defend Healers at the cost of their own lives. Warriors were sworn to protect Healers, and there was no choice but to protect Healers or die trying. Healers' lives were more valuable than those of Warriors. Healers would be the Clans' salvation. It was Healing that the world needed in order to be rebuilt again.

*Put together. Together again,* the Jaguar echoed and he was still mocking, just an echo of the Warrior's own thoughts.

The Warrior opened his eyes, realizing he'd come back to

the real world. There'd been no true answer from Mother Nature's Spirits. There'd been no answer for him.

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*Healer Clan Village*

Raina listened to her grandmother's voice, as Ayla Featherstone went on to tell the tale of how the people of the Clans had fared in the Forest they'd turned into their home.

In time, it had become clear that those who had the mutation which had allowed them to defeat the illness could produce children who had the same mutation as they did. Warriors could have Warrior children, while Healers could bring Healer children into the world, but those children were, always, less than a quarter of the children born to the people of the Clans. Most of the children born, even to Warriors or to Healers, were just healthy, ordinary children. They were simply as children had been before the Great Sorrow, with no Warrior or Healer abilities. The Healers rejoiced, proclaiming that Great Mother Nature was healing Herself and reverting to Her initial state. Probably, in a few generations, the mutation itself would be entirely gone. Just as Shadow Walkers would disappear. But some of the Warriors were angry. They wanted gifted Warrior children, with enhanced powers and a feral nature, even now when Shadow Walkers were no longer a true menace.

“Some of the Warrior Clans chose the Path of Shadows. They sought out the remaining Shadow Walkers and managed to imprison some of them in pens and cages, binding them with silver chains. The Sickness itself is no longer a menace that can spread through mere closeness or contact. However, it is well known that when someone who's



not gifted is bitten by a Shadow Walker, the Sickness will always get into their bodies. And, if left untreated by a Healer for more than two days, it will cause a transformation. Most of the time those infected will turn into Shadow Walkers, but other times they will overcome the Sickness and become Warriors. So some of the Warrior Clans chose to do the unthinkable. They led ungifted children to see the imprisoned Shadow Walkers, and let them be bitten by the creatures. Most of these children turned into mindless beasts that were brutally killed or kept in cages for future use. However, some of the children did indeed become Warriors.”

There was a saddened silence in the audience, broken only by a timid, childish voice, “But, Chief, I don’t understand. Didn’t you say that those who got the sickness and did not become Shadow Walkers could become either Warriors or Healers? Were no new Healers made this way?”

“That is a very good question, Tammy,” Raina’s grandmother said with an approving smile. “Can any of the older children explain to Tammy why this did not happen?”

The commemoration was, of course, always a good opportunity to repeat the lesson for all the children of the Clan, whether they were Gifted or not.

“At first, no one knew why,” a freckled boy of about twelve ventured after he raised his hand, “but this is a curse of Great Mother Nature. Shadow Warriors got punished for being too cruel, so no Healers could be born of them.”

“A curse, yes,” Raina’s grandmother said with a grave nod of her head. “But,” she added pointedly, “like all curses, it has its explanations in the very workings of Mother Nature. You see, what people had not understood at the beginning of the Great Sorrow was that those who transitioned to Warriors were usually those who had been bitten or scratched by Shadow Walkers. What our ancestors called the “virus” had come into direct contact with the blood stream

of those who were injured, and they got infected far faster than other people who had succumbed to the sickness. Those who initially transitioned to Healers had come into contact only with the skin of those infected, with their secretions and the objects these people had touched. Two mutations — Warriors or Healers, achieved in different ways.”

Tammy now looked at her Chief with a frown on her face, and Raina smiled to herself, knowing the child would probably grow up to be one the cleverest Healers in their Clan.

“But couldn’t the evil Warriors just let the children in the Shadow Walkers’ presence? Couldn’t they still get sick like that in order to become Healers, not Warriors?”

“They certainly did try it,” the Chief nodded. “And who can tell Tammy why they did not succeed?”

A teen’s hand shot up, and Raina’s grandmother gave him permission to speak.

“This was, actually, one of Great Mother Nature’s blessings, and one of the reasons the Shadow Walkers’ numbers have been dwindling. Because, as years passed, the children of the Clans became mostly immune to those small droplets responsible for spreading the Shadow Sickness. Tammy, “immune” means they couldn’t get sick that way anymore. Unless the Sickness was directly inserted into the blood, it was no longer a threat to the new generations. Most of our people have developed the capacity to resist the form transmitted from person to person. It’s something that now seldom affects us in any way. So it’s very rare, almost impossible for a new Shadow Walker or, for that matter, a new Healer to emerge that way. A Shadow Walker’s bite is different though. Ungifted people still suffer from its effects. And those left untreated who don’t turn into mindless beasts have the chance to become Warriors.”

Most of the older children nodded, and so did some of

the younger ones. Healers had always been less numerous than Warriors. And now their numbers were even smaller. There were around six hundred people in the entire Southern Forest Healer Clan. Less than one hundred people were true Healers though. The rest did not have the Gift, but all of them had been taught good healing skills and had an affinity for healing.

“So, you see, children,” Raina’s grandmother said gravely. “Mother Nature is often merciless, but She is always just to us. She sent the Great Sorrow to us and diminished our numbers in order to teach us a lesson for the wicked way in which our ancestors abused Her Gifts. But She allowed our children to survive. However, now evil men are trying to tamper with Her Ways and we must be wary of them.”

Raina bit her tongue, because she would have liked to say that Healers should be wary of all Warriors, no matter the Clan they came from. There had been three Warrior Clans in the Southern Forest: Tigers and Jaguars and Eagles. She’d seen such Warriors walk through her village whenever they’d come for Healing. She’d even helped treat some of them. Not a month ago, some had been from the Tiger Clan, who had chosen to walk the Path of Shadows. Yet others had been from the Jaguar Clan or the Eagle Clan, who still abided by Mother Nature’s just laws. Until recently, as Healers, her Clan had not refused to treat any of the Warriors who had come seeking aid, no matter their conflicts and no matter the Path they had walked on. To her, there was no difference among Jaguar or Tiger or Eagle Warriors. Warriors were all feral and arrogant, and glanced upon other people as if they were subservient to them.

With a small sigh of frustration, she now told herself it was no wonder she’d been dreaming of Warriors so often lately. And she tried to tell herself it was because of her anxiety over the war that was brewing and because of her

dislike of Warriors that her dreams were the way they were. Although, she dimly remembered there hadn't been several Warriors in her dreams but just one. One Warrior—whose face she simply could not recall. It was strange, however, that she recalled his hands. Big hands. Hands which were... Here Raina blushed fiercely because she remembered well, but did not want to fully remember what the Warrior's big hands had been doing in her dream.

When the commemoration ended, Raina clapped and shouted along with the others, cheering for the feast that was to begin. There would be dancing and drinking and merry-making around the big bonfire that burned in the Village Square.

"Come, Raina," one of her friends beckoned with a wide smile, taking hold of her hand and leading her to join the dancers.

Raina smiled in return, letting warmth and joy envelop her. Looking at her clanspeople's radiant faces, she felt a deep bond of kinship with them, not only with those who possessed the Healing Gift just as she did, but with each and every one of them: those who taught others, or tended the crops, or those who built and fixed things. Each and every member of the Clan had a valuable part to play. After the commemoration of the days of Great Sorrow, it was always time to think about fixing things and about making their world a secure place again. Yet, tonight, the joy of the feast was somewhat overshadowed.

"We should make the most of tonight," one of Raina's other friends called. "It's probably the last celebration we'll get for a long time to come. War will soon be upon us."

There were mutters of assent from many of the others. But most of them set aside the bitter thought of war for the time being, and they abandoned themselves to the music of drums and guitars, dancing and laughing around the bonfire.

The cheerful celebration was welcome because these were harder times than before. Warriors were involved, as always, in their bitter conflicts, and this time their conflict was threatening to destroy not only their own Clans but also the Southern Forest Healer Clan. So far Healers had kept themselves apart from Warriors' feuds, but this time they could no longer be neutral. The Tiger Clan had given themselves to full evil, and no Healer would treat a Tiger Warrior from now on.

Raina tried to chase away the thought of tomorrow for now. She fully intended to make use of this last opportunity to be carefree. She loved dancing, so she immersed herself once again into the music, letting her body be carried away by the frenzy of the fast rhythm. The celebration held long into the night, until Raina was flushed and breathless from the dancing. From time to time, she'd tried to get her serious sister Lena to join in the merrymaking, but Lena had always declined.

"Sometimes I don't even believe you're my real sister," Raina complained, as she finally collapsed, exhausted from the dancing, near where her sister was demurely sitting on the grass. "You're so proper and prim and stiff!"

Lena gave her a dry smile and looked at her from behind her bespectacled brown eyes.

"But I am your sister. I am just as bad at Healing people as you are. Worse even. Born from a family of great Healers, and possessing the Gift. Yet unable to use it properly to cure others or myself."

Raina sighed, knowing it was so like Lena to always think of unpleasant things. It was not as if Raina did not feel her own inability to use her Healing Gift properly just as keenly as her sister, but sometimes she just wanted to forget her worries, and focus on the present moment. It was necessary to try to be carefree sometimes. With every day that passed,

it seemed to Raina she was having an even harder time to control her temper than usual. Sometimes she felt completely out of control. Towering rage and rash impulses often took hold of her. And as long as she was unable to rein in her temper, she had no true expectations to ever control her Healing Gift. Still, tonight she wanted to believe that one day things would be different.

“Grandmother says it is sometimes like that in our family. Some of us are late bloomers. Her own grandmother came into the fullness of the Gift pretty late, and she turned out to be the greatest Healer of her generation.”

Lena waved her hand.

“She’s just saying that to reassure us. But I know she’s been worried.”

Raina thought, as always, her sister was correct, but she shook her head, because she could not bear to think about her Gift at this time:

“Grandmother is worried about what’s happening around us”, she said, as she began to straighten the loose tendrils of black hair that had escaped their pins. “In their senseless violence, Tiger Warriors have left no member of the Eagle Clan to tell the tale of their defeat. A whole Warrior Clan gone! Innocent people murdered. Of course we should all now fear the Warriors of the Tiger Clan, who’ve chosen to walk even deeper on the Path of Shadows. That’s why Gran signed the Treaty with the Jaguar Clan. But Jaguars are like all Warriors... savage. So of course she worries. She’s wondering if this Treaty is the best thing, even if there’s really little choice.”

Lena cast her sister a steady glance.

“But it is the best thing. Jaguar Warriors honor the Pact that was made long ago between Warriors and Healers. Warriors are sworn to protect Healers, and Jaguars have always protected us. Unlike Tiger Warriors, they are all

honorable. They do not walk the Path of Shadows. They uphold Mother Nature's laws."

Lena was right. There was no other choice at present but to forge an alliance with the Jaguars. For two-hundred years, it had been all Warriors' sacred duty to protect Healers at all costs, and not to interfere in any of the Healers' ways. Yet the Chief of the Tiger Clan had other plans now. He wanted to lord over all lands surrounding this side of the Forest and to destroy his remaining Warrior enemies, the Jaguar Clan. He'd wiped the Eagle Clan off the face of the earth. And now he wanted the Southern Forest Healer Clan to become subject to his authority. Healing was one of Mother Nature's greatest blessings. And he thought only his Warriors should benefit from it. But Healers had always been independent, and they should remain so. At this point, the Healer Clan had been forced to choose a side, the one which didn't involve the Path of Shadows. Still, Raina felt uneasy about the Treaty her grandmother had signed with the new Jaguar Chief.

"Jaguars might not walk the Path of Shadows," she said pointedly, "but they're every bit as feral and arrogant as those of the Tiger Clan. You've seen how they carry themselves when they come to our village for Healing. Their voices are loud and demanding and their eyes brazen."

Raina disliked all Warriors intensely. She'd heard Jaguar males were forceful with the women they married. They abused them by spanking their bare bottoms with their big, shovel-like hands. And Raina could harbor nothing but disgust for men who abused women. From what she'd seen, she doubted the occasional female Warriors were any better than the males.

"They're different. What may seem loud and brazen to you may be the norm for them," Lena said in her infuriatingly calm voice. "In the last few years I've gotten to know

some of our patients. Jaguars and Eagles and even some of the Tigers. They were different indeed, but different does not always mean bad. And the crazy stories one hears about them... Most of these stories are not true at all.”

Why did her sister always have to be so reasonable? Raina wondered with a pang of irritation. Lena was, of course, talking sense, but Raina had never been able to shake her dislike of all Warriors, Jaguar or otherwise. And she already knew that almost everyone in the Village felt the same. Healer Clan members kept their distance as much as they could from Warriors, even when they had to treat them. Warriors and Healers did not really mix. They only traded and they relied on each other. But they never actually talked or spent unnecessary time together. This was how things had always been after the Great Sorrow, and, to Raina’s mind, things were just as they were supposed to be.

“Gran should be wary. She seems to place great faith in the new Jaguar Chief,” she muttered, knowing that in the following days, a party of Jaguar Warriors would come to stay in their Village.

So far Warriors had entered the Healer Village only when they were in need of Healing. It was the first time in history that Jaguar Warriors would come to reside in the Healer Village. And they would come in order to strengthen the Village’s defenses. The Tiger Clan was on the war path. They’d been refused Healing. So they now meant to break the Pact, and Healers would no longer be safe from them.

“Gran knows what she’s doing,” Lena countered, in her steady, infuriatingly self-assured voice.

As if she had somehow mysteriously known that her granddaughters were talking about her, Ayla Featherstone called to them from the high chair she’d been sitting on, overseeing the festivities.



"I guess it's time to retire," Raina said, a bit sad that the merrymaking had ended.

But even dancing and laughter had to end, she supposed, as they walked together with her grandmother to their fair-sized, circular dwelling. They lit the oil lamps as they got in, and Raina assumed their grandmother was quite tired and wanted nothing more than to go to bed, since she was no longer as strong as she used to be. But their grandmother's voice indicated otherwise.

"Let us sit and talk for a while," Ayla Featherstone told them, seating herself on her favorite cushion, by the low table where they usually had their breakfast and snacks.

Lena readily obeyed, taking her own usual place at the table, but Raina remained standing. She knew her grandmother's voice, and there was something in it that didn't bode well.

"What is it?" she asked, as directly as usual.

Her grandmother sighed.

"How old are you, Raina? Twenty this year, I recall... yet you don't act twenty. You act like an impatient child all the time."

Raina shrugged, already used to her grandmother's criticism.

"You've something important to tell us. I know it. So why postpone it?"

"Just as impulsive as your father," her grandmother muttered with an indulgent smile, but, just after she uttered the words, deep worry lines formed around her mouth. "Promise me you will not be impulsive about it, but level-headed, just like your older sister. I've kept postponing this because I didn't know how to tell you. I've tried talking to you a hundred times but there never seemed to be a good time. And now... perhaps it should be done bluntly, irrevocably, because, really, there is no other choice."

Raina widened her eyes.

“You are starting to worry me.”

“Please, Raina, it’s nothing as dramatic as you think,”  
Lena’s infuriatingly calm voice cut in.

Raina turned toward her sister in surprise.

“Oh... so it’s something you already knew about! And you didn’t see fit to tell me!”

“Enough, Raina, enough. Just listen to what I have to say,” their grandmother said in a placating voice.

So Raina reluctantly seated herself on her cushion to listen to what her grandmother had to say.