

MALIGOWEN

THE LAST SPIRIT WALKER



MSH
MASTER
STORYTELLER



CURTIS BROWN

Maligowen:

The Last Spirit Walker

by

Curtis Brown



MANDIE SAFE HAVEN

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Author:

Special Dedication:

To my daughters —
the light that keeps the fire in my heart burning.

There was a time when I thought I knew the story I wanted to tell...about the land, the spirits, and finding our way home through life's storms. But as the pages filled, I realized it had become the story I needed to tell, one born of love, loss, and the quiet strength that rises when we remember who we are and where we come from.

This book is for you, my daughters — Cassandra, Jessica, Ariel, Gabbi, and Anabella — whose laughter has filled the spaces where silence once lived. You've taught me that healing doesn't come all at once, but in small sacred moments — in forgiveness, in kindness, in the courage to begin again. You are living proof that beauty survives brokenness, and that the spark of our ancestors still burns in every smile and dream you carry.

To my little girls, Ashley, Zoey, and Elizabeth — and to my granddaughters and the generations yet to come — may you always walk gently, speak truth even when your voice trembles, and listen to the wisdom in your hearts. You come from storytellers, warriors, and healers who kept the flame alive so that you could shine.

The story I wanted to tell became the story I needed to tell...because of all of you.

You are my proof that the heart knows better than the mind what must be said.

With love beyond words,

Dad



Chapter 1:

The Narrows of the Great Spirit

The morning sun broke across Lake Manitoba like fire spreading across water, turning the surface into liquid copper. Maligowen stood at the shore's edge, her bare feet pressed into the cold sand, watching the light dance and shimmer across what her people called Man-into-wahpaow—the narrows of the Great Spirit. Here, where the great lake pinched narrow at its center, the water moved differently, as if something ancient breathed beneath its surface.

She was eleven seasons old, small for her age but quick as a fox, with eyes that her father said could see what others missed. Her long black hair hung in a single braid down her back, woven with a strip of red cloth her mother had dyed from cranberries. The leather dress she wore was practical, hemmed short enough to run in, with leggings beneath to protect against thorns and insects. Around her waist hung a small knife in a beaded sheath—a gift from her oldest brother, Makwa, who had taught her how to use it.

"*Maligowen!*" The voice cut through the morning calm. She turned to see her other brother, Wapan, jogging toward her with his characteristic lopsided grin. At sixteen seasons, he was lean and tall,

already showing the broad shoulders that marked the men of their family. *"Father says if you're done talking to the fish, he needs you to help Nokomis with the medicine bundles."*

"I wasn't talking to the fish," she said, though she had been. Sometimes she could feel them beneath the surface, their silver bodies flashing in the depths, speaking in a language that wasn't quite words but somehow made sense to her. She'd never told anyone about this, not even Wapan, who told her almost everything.

"Of course not," Wapan said, his smile widening. *"And I suppose you weren't also standing perfectly still for so long that a crow landed on your shoulder thinking you were a post?"*

Maligowen's hand flew to her shoulder, and Wapan burst into laughter. *"Made you look! Come on, Ghost Traveler. The day is wasting."*

Ghost Traveler. The name had started as a joke between her brothers, given because she moved so quietly through the forest that even the deer didn't hear her coming. But lately, the name felt different on her tongue, heavier somehow, as if it meant something more than they intended.

The village stretched along the lake shore in a semi-circle of birchbark lodges, their curved surfaces silvery in the morning light. Smoke rose from the central fire pit where several women were already at work, and the air carried the rich scent of fish being smoked and the sweet smell of maple sugar being processed. Children ran between the lodges, their laughter punctuating the morning sounds of the camp—the rhythmic scraping of hide being processed, the thunk of axes splitting wood, the low voices of men discussing the day's hunt.

Their father's lodge stood slightly apart from the others, larger and adorned with symbols painted in red ochre and charcoal—the bear that was his spirit guide, the cross within a circle that

represented the four directions, and the wavy lines that symbolized the lake and the rivers that fed it. As chief, Mistahi-maskwa—Great Bear—was responsible for the well-being of nearly sixty people, a responsibility he carried with both strength and an unusual openness to change.

Inside the lodge, Nokomis sat by the fire, her weathered hands sorting through bundles of dried herbs spread on a tanned hide before her. The old woman was the tribe's medicine keeper, her knowledge spanning seven decades of gathering, preparing, and administering the plants that healed. Her face was a map of wrinkles, each line a story, and her eyes were sharp as obsidian despite her years.

"Ah, the little walker arrives," Nokomis said without looking up. *"Come, child. Your fingers are young and nimble. Help me bundle the yarrow. We'll need much of it before the snow comes."*

Maligowen settled cross-legged beside her grandmother, breathing in the complex mixture of scents—sage for cleansing, sweetgrass for prayers, cedar for protection, and dozens of others she was still learning to identify by smell alone. She began gathering the dried yarrow stems, their feathery leaves crackling softly in her hands.

"Your father tells me you've been asking about the old ceremonies," Nokomis said, her tone casual but her eyes sharp as they flicked to Maligowen's face. *"The vision quests and the spirit walks."*

"I want to understand," Maligowen said carefully. *"Makwa says only men go on vision quests, but you told me once about a woman who..."*

"Makwa speaks of tradition as it is commonly known," Nokomis interrupted gently. *"But tradition is like a river, child. It flows, it changes its course, and sometimes it returns to old paths that have been forgotten."* She tied off a bundle with practiced efficiency. *"There*

have been women who walked with spirits, who led with wisdom given from beyond. Not many, and not often, but they existed. Your father knows this. It's why he allows you to learn the skills of both hunter and gatherer."

Maligowen's heart quickened. She had always sensed her father was different from other chiefs, more willing to see beyond the usual ways. But to hear Nokomis speak of women leaders, women who communed with spirits—it was like a door opening in her mind.

"Did they choose it?" Maligowen asked. *"Or did it choose them?"*

Nokomis's hands stilled. When she looked at Maligowen, her eyes held something that might have been recognition, or perhaps concern. *"The spirits choose whom they will. The only choice we have is whether to answer when they call."* She reached out and touched Maligowen's cheek with one gnarled finger. *"And sometimes, little one, the spirits call very loudly indeed."*

Before Maligowen could ask what she meant, the lodge flap swept aside and her father entered, ducking through the opening. Mistahi-maskwa was a bear of a man, broad-shouldered and thick-armed, his long hair shot through with silver despite being only forty seasons old. His face was strong-featured, weathered by sun and wind, but his eyes were kind as they found his daughter.

"There you are, Maligowen. Good. I need your eyes today." He settled himself by the fire, and Nokomis handed him a clay bowl of cedar tea. *"We're tracking the caribou herd. Makwa and I found their trail two days north, but the signs are... unusual. I want you to look at them with me."*

Pride swelled in Maligowen's chest. Her father often asked for her observations on the hunt, valued her ability to notice things others missed—a broken twig that told a story, a pattern in the grass that revealed direction and number. But this felt different, more important somehow.

"Wapan said you needed me to help Nokomis," she said, glancing at her grandmother.

"I said no such thing," Nokomis replied with a slight smile. *"Your brother assumes too much. Go with your father, child. The herbs will wait."*

They left the village as the sun climbed higher, following the path that led north along the lake shore before turning inland toward the forest. Her father moved with surprising quiet for a man his size, and Maligowen matched his pace, her senses opening to the world around her—the rustle of aspen leaves, the distant call of a loon, the smell of pine resin warming in the sun.

"Your brothers worry about you," her father said after a time. *"Especially Makwa. He thinks I push you too hard, ask too much of you."*

"He thinks I should be grinding corn and sewing moccasins," Maligowen said, unable to keep the frustration from her voice.

"He thinks he's protecting you. It's what older brothers do." Mistahi-maskwa paused, his hand resting on the trunk of a birch tree. *"But I see something in you, daughter. A quality I cannot name but recognize nonetheless. You move through the world differently than others. You notice things. You feel things."* He looked down at her, his expression serious. *"Has anything... unusual happened to you lately? Dreams that feel more real than waking? Moments where you sense things before they occur?"*

Maligowen's breath caught. How could he know? She thought of the fish in the lake, how she could feel their presence. The way sometimes she knew her brothers were approaching before she heard them. The dreams that had been growing more vivid, more strange—dreams where she walked through a forest that glowed with silver light, where voices spoke in a language she didn't know but somehow understood.

"Sometimes," she admitted quietly. "I thought everyone felt these things."

Her father's hand settled on her shoulder, warm and grounding. *"No, little one. Not everyone. But some do. And those who do have a responsibility to learn what it means, to understand the gift they've been given."* He squeezed gently. *"We'll talk more of this. But first, let me show you what I found. Because I think your unusual senses might help us understand it."*

They walked deeper into the forest, and Maligowen felt the familiar comfort of the trees close around her. Here, among the whispering leaves and dappled shadows, she always felt most herself. Here, the voice inside her that sometimes whispered things she couldn't quite hear grew slightly louder.

But today, as they approached the caribou trail, that voice went suddenly silent. And in its place came something else, a sensation she'd never felt before, a prickling at the back of her neck like invisible eyes watching. Her father had stopped ahead of her, kneeling by a series of tracks in the soft earth.

"Do you see?" he asked.

But Maligowen wasn't looking at the tracks. She was staring into the deeper forest beyond, where the shadows seemed darker than they should be, where the air felt different somehow. And there, barely detectable beneath the normal scents of pine and earth and growing things, was something else.

Something unfamiliar.

Something wrong.

"Father," she whispered, her voice strange in her own ears. *"Do you smell that?"*

Mistahi-maskwa lifted his head, nostrils flaring. For a moment, they both stood frozen, breathing in the cold autumn air. And

Maligowen knew with absolute certainty that whatever she was sensing, whatever was coming, would change everything.

The scent of smoke and something metallic, like blood but not quite, drifted through the trees. And in the distance, too far for normal ears to hear, came the sound of voices speaking in words she had never heard before.

The world shifted beneath her feet, and Maligowen understood with sudden, terrible clarity that the life she had known, the simple life of a chief's daughter learning her tribe's ways, was about to end. Something new was beginning, something that would require every skill she had learned and some she had not yet discovered.

The Great Spirit's narrows had brought many things to her people over the generations. But what was coming now felt different. It felt like destiny.



Chapter 2: The Strange Scent

Three days had passed since Maligowen and her father discovered the tracks in the forest, and still the strange scent lingered at the edges of her awareness like smoke that refused to dissipate. Her father had sent scouts in all directions, but they returned with reports of nothing unusual—caribou moving south as they always did with the changing season, a fox den near the eastern ridge, the ordinary rhythms of the forest preparing for winter.

But Maligowen knew better. She could feel wrongness in the air like a coming storm, could taste it in the back of her throat when the wind shifted from the south. Whatever was approaching hadn't arrived yet, but it was getting closer.

The autumn nights had grown bitter, frost forming delicate patterns on the lake stones each morning. The women had been working frantically to prepare for winter, smoking the last of the season's fish, grinding dried corn, packing pemmican into birchbark containers sealed with pine resin. The men brought in deer and elk, and the village hummed with the controlled urgency that always preceded the hard season.

Tonight, the work had continued late into the evening. Maligowen sat outside her family's lodge, scraping the last bits of flesh from a

deer hide by firelight, her hands moving in the practiced rhythm Nokomis had taught her. Around her, the sounds of the village were settling into night—children being called to bed, the low murmur of adult voices, someone singing a soft prayer to the evening star.

Makwa emerged from the lodge, stretching his arms above his head. At nineteen seasons, he was broader than Wapan, more serious, with their father's steady presence. He'd been preparing arrows for tomorrow's hunt, and wood shavings clung to his leather shirt.

"You should sleep, little sister," he said, settling beside her. *"You've been working since dawn."*

"So have you," she replied, not looking up from her work.

"Yes, but I'm not a child who needs..." He stopped, reconsidering his words. *"You're growing up. I forget sometimes."*

Maligowen smiled despite herself. Makwa's protectiveness could be suffocating, but it came from love. *"I'm not tired yet. My hands remember the work even when my mind wanders."*

"Where does your mind wander to?" He picked up a stick and poked at the fire, sending sparks spiraling into the dark sky.

She almost told him then—about the scent she couldn't shake, the feeling of being watched, the way her dreams had become so vivid she sometimes woke unsure which world was real. But something held her back. Makwa believed in tradition, in the old ways as they had always been. He would worry, might try to protect her from something she was beginning to understand she needed to face.

"Nowhere important," she said instead. *"Just thinking about winter. Wondering if we've prepared enough."*

Makwa studied her face in the firelight, and for a moment she thought he might press further. But then Wapan's voice called from

inside the lodge, something about checking the fish racks one more time, and Makwa rose with a sigh.

"Don't stay up too late," he said, ruffling her hair the way he had since she was small.

Maligowen continued her work after he left, but her attention kept drifting to the forest beyond the ring of firelight. The trees stood like dark sentinels, their branches black against the star-scattered sky. Somewhere in those depths, something waited. She could feel it pulling at her awareness like the moon pulled the tides.

The fire had burned low when she finally set aside the scraped hide and stood, her joints stiff from sitting. Most of the village had retired to their lodges, though a few fires still burned where people sat in quiet conversation. The night was clear and cold, her breath misting in the air.

She should go inside. Should join her family in the warm lodge where her mother would have already banked the central fire and laid out the sleeping robes. But her feet carried her instead toward the edge of the village, toward the path that led to the forest.

Just a few steps, she told herself. Just to the tree line.

But once she reached the trees, the pull grew stronger. The forest at night was a different world—familiar landmarks transformed into strange shapes, every shadow alive with possibility. Most people feared the dark woods, but Maligowen had always felt safe here, protected by something she couldn't name.

Tonight felt different.

She moved between the trees as quietly as she'd been taught, her feet finding soft moss and avoiding dry twigs by instinct. The moonlight filtered through the bare branches in silver streams, illuminating her path. She wasn't sure where she was going, only that

she needed to move, to follow this invisible thread that seemed to tug at her very spirit.

The scent hit her suddenly—that same wrong smell from three days ago, but stronger now. Smoke, but not wood smoke. Something metallic and sharp underneath, and another odor she couldn't identify, foreign and disturbing. Her heart began to pound, but she didn't run. Instead, she moved toward it.

The forest opened into a small clearing she knew well, a place where she sometimes came to practice shooting her small bow. But tonight, the clearing was different. The air itself seemed to shimmer, like heat rising from sun-warmed stones, though the night was cold. And there, in the center of the clearing, stood a figure.

Maligowen froze, every muscle tensed to flee. But the figure didn't move. It simply stood there, and as her eyes adjusted, she realized it wasn't quite solid. She could see through it to the trees beyond, could see moonlight passing through its form like light through water.

A spirit.

She had heard stories all her life about spirit encounters, about the ancestors who walked between worlds and the guardians who protected sacred places. But she had never seen one, had never truly believed she would. Yet here it stood, tall and wrapped in what looked like ancient furs, its face obscured by shadow.

"Don't be afraid, child." The voice came not through her ears but directly into her mind, like a thought that wasn't her own. It was neither male nor female, neither young nor old, but something beyond such simple categories.

"Who are you?" Maligowen whispered, surprised her voice worked at all.

"I am one who walked your path long ago. One who was called, as you are being called." The figure moved closer, and Maligowen could make out more details—the intricate beadwork on the clothing, the medicine bundle at the waist, the staff carved with symbols she'd never seen. *"You have been sensing the changes, haven't you? Feeling the world shift around you?"*

Maligowen nodded, unable to speak.

"The gift is awakening in you. The ability to walk between the physical and spiritual worlds, to see what others cannot see, to hear the voices of those who have passed beyond." The spirit's form flickered like a candle flame. *"It is both a blessing and a burden, little one. Are you ready to accept it?"*

"I don't understand," Maligowen managed. *"Why me? I'm just..."*

"Just a chief's daughter?" The spirit's tone held something like amusement. *"Just a girl who speaks to fish and moves through the forest like wind? Just a child who knows things before they happen and feels the pain of the earth itself?"* The figure raised one translucent hand. *"You have never been 'just' anything, Maligowen. The spirits have been watching you since your birth. The ancestors have been waiting for you to grow strong enough to carry their message."*

"What message?" Fear and excitement warred in Maligowen's chest, making her feel dizzy.

"That great changes are coming. That your people will face trials unlike any they have known. That they will need a leader who can walk in both worlds, who can hear the wisdom of the ancestors while guiding the living." The spirit began to fade, becoming more transparent. *"But first, you must be tested. You must die to your old life so that you may be reborn into your true purpose."*

"Die?" The word came out as barely more than a breath.

"Not as you fear. But the child you are must end so the woman you will become can emerge. It will happen soon, Maligowen. Very soon. When it does, do not fight it. Let yourself fall. The ancestors will catch you."

"Wait!" Maligowen stepped forward, reaching out. *"What do I do? How do I prepare?"*

But the spirit was gone, dissolved into moonlight and shadow. Only the strange scent remained, and even that was fading rapidly. Maligowen stood alone in the clearing, her heart racing, her mind reeling with everything she'd just witnessed.

Had it been real? Or had exhaustion and stress created visions where none existed? She looked down at her hands, half-expecting to see them glowing or changed somehow, but they were the same small, calloused hands they'd always been.

A twig snapped behind her.

Maligowen spun, and her breath caught. At the edge of the clearing stood another figure, but this one was solid, real, and very much alive. A man she'd never seen before, dressed in strange clothing—cloth where her people wore leather, colors that seemed unnatural in the moonlight. His face was pale, his hair the color of dried grass, and in his hands he carried something that gleamed like metal but was shaped unlike any tool or weapon she knew.

Their eyes met across the clearing. For a heartbeat, neither moved. Then the stranger's mouth opened, and he called out in words that sounded harsh and incomprehensible, nothing like the flowing syllables of her own language.

More voices answered from the forest behind him. More strangers. The scent overwhelmed her now—smoke from their fires, metal from their strange tools, and the sharp smell of fear and sweat.

Maligowen turned and ran.

She flew through the forest like a deer, her feet finding purchase on roots and stones without conscious thought. Behind her, she heard crashing and shouting, but she was faster, knew these woods like she knew her own heartbeat. She ran until her lungs burned, until her legs trembled, until she burst into the village clearing with enough force that several people looked up in alarm.

"Father!" The word ripped from her throat. *"Father! Strangers! In the forest!"*

Mistahi-maskwa emerged from the lodge immediately, already reaching for the war club that hung by the entrance. Other men were grabbing weapons, calling questions. But Maligowen's eyes found her father's, and in that moment, she saw understanding there. He knew. Somehow, he had known this was coming.

"How many?" he asked calmly, his voice cutting through the rising chaos.

"I saw one, but heard more. They're... they're different, Father. Not from any tribe I know. Their clothes, their tools, even their smell is wrong."

Makwa and Wapan appeared at their father's side, both armed. *"Traders?"* Wapan suggested. *"From the south?"*

But Mistahi-maskwa was already shaking his head, his eyes still locked on Maligowen's face. *"No. These are the ones I've heard whispers of. The pale ones who came across the great water. The ones who claim the land for themselves."* He looked around at his gathered people, his expression grave. *"The ones who bring change and death in equal measure."*

Nokomis pushed through the crowd, her weathered hand finding Maligowen's shoulder. The old woman's touch was gentle but grounding, and Maligowen realized she was shaking.

"The child has seen them," Nokomis said quietly to Mistahi-maskwa. "But she has seen something else too. Look at her eyes."

Maligowen's father leaned closer, studying her face in the firelight. Whatever he saw there made his expression soften from warrior to father. *"What else did you see, daughter?"*

"A spirit," Maligowen whispered, aware of all the eyes on her now, of the sudden silence that had fallen over the gathering. *"In the clearing. It spoke to me. It said... it said I was being called. That changes were coming. That I would need to die to my old life."*

The silence deepened. Someone made a soft sound of fear or awe. But Nokomis's hand tightened on her shoulder, and when Maligowen looked at her grandmother, she saw tears gleaming in the old woman's eyes.

"It has begun," Nokomis said softly. *"The awakening. Just as the signs foretold."* She looked at Mistahi-maskwa. *"Your daughter walks between worlds now. The spirits have claimed her."*

Maligowen felt the weight of everyone's stares, felt the shift in how they looked at her, no longer just the chief's daughter, no longer just a girl who was good at hunting. Something had changed in that clearing, something that could never be undone.

And beyond the circle of firelight, beyond the safety of the village, the strangers were out there in the darkness. The ones who brought change. The ones who would test everything her people had ever known.

The cold autumn night had indeed changed everything. Just as the spirit had promised.

Just as she had somehow always known it would.



Chapter 3:

The First Vision

The warriors returned at dawn with troubling news. They had tracked the strangers to a temporary camp five miles south, near the bend in the river where the wild rice grew thick. There were twelve of them—all men, all armed with the strange metal tools that could kill from a distance. They had built fires that burned too hot and bright, had erected shelters of cloth instead of bark, and spoke in their harsh, incomprehensible tongue while studying crude drawings on what looked like thin, pale bark.

"Maps," her father had called them. "They are trying to understand our land. To claim it as their own."

The tribe council had met immediately, voices rising in debate that lasted through the morning. Some wanted to drive the strangers away. Others argued for caution, for sending an emissary to understand their intentions. A few whispered that perhaps trade could be established, that the strangers' metal tools might be valuable.

But Maligowen barely heard the arguments. She sat at the edge of the gathering, her body present but her mind elsewhere, still trapped in that moment in the clearing. The spirit's words echoed through her thoughts like stones dropped in still water, each repetition creating new ripples of meaning.

You must die to your old life so that you may be reborn into your true purpose.

What did it mean? How did one die without dying?

"Child." Nokomis's voice cut through her reverie. The old woman stood before her, wrapped in a thick bear fur against the morning chill. *"Come. We must talk away from anxious ears."*

Maligowen followed her grandmother away from the council gathering, away from the village itself, down a path that led to a place she had visited many times—a small grove of ancient cedars that grew in a perfect circle around a flat stone altar. This was Nokomis's sacred place, where she came to pray and prepare medicines that required spiritual blessing.

The air felt different here, thicker somehow, as if the boundary between worlds grew thin among these old trees. Maligowen had always sensed it, but today the feeling was overwhelming. The trees seemed to hum with energy she could almost see, and the ground beneath her feet felt alive with purpose.

Nokomis settled herself on the stone, her joints creaking with the movement. She gestured for Maligowen to sit beside her, then remained silent for a long moment, her eyes closed, her lips moving in silent prayer.

Finally, she opened her eyes and looked at her granddaughter with an expression of deep sadness mixed with something that might have been pride.

"I have been waiting for this day since you were born," Nokomis said quietly. *"Hoping it would not come, knowing it must. The signs were there from the beginning—the ease with which animals approached you, the way plants seemed to grow more vigorously where you walked, the dreams you had even as a small child. Dreams you thought you kept secret, but which you spoke of in your sleep."*

Maligowen's breath caught. *"You knew?"*

"I am medicine keeper. It is my responsibility to watch for such things, to recognize when the spirits choose one of our people for their purposes." Nokomis took Maligowen's hand in both of hers, her skin paper-thin and warm. *"Your gift is rare, child. I have lived seven decades and known only two others who could walk between worlds as you will learn to do. One was my own teacher, dead now these forty years. The other..."*

She trailed off, her eyes distant with memory.

"The other what?" Maligowen pressed.

"The other went mad," Nokomis said bluntly. *"The visions overwhelmed him. He could no longer tell what was real and what was spirit. He walked into the lake one winter and never returned."* She squeezed Maligowen's hand. *"This gift is not given lightly, and it is not without cost. You must be strong, must learn to protect your mind, or it will consume you."*

Fear bloomed cold in Maligowen's chest. *"Then how do I..."*

"You learn. You practice. You accept that you are no longer simply yourself, but also a vessel for the ancestors' wisdom." Nokomis released her hand and reached into the medicine bundle at her waist, pulling out a small leather pouch. *"I have been preparing this for years, hoping I would never need to give it to you. But the time has come."*

She opened the pouch and tipped its contents into her palm—a mixture of dried plants Maligowen recognized: sage, sweetgrass, and something else she couldn't identify, something that glowed faintly even in the morning light.

"This is called spirit root. It grows only in places where the veil between worlds is thinnest. When prepared correctly and taken with proper intention, it opens the mind fully to the spirit realm."

Nokomis's voice grew stern. *"It is dangerous. You may see things that terrify you. You may encounter spirits who are not friendly, who will test you or try to lead you astray. But if you survive the vision, if you find your way back, you will understand your gift. You will know your purpose."*

"And if I don't survive it?" Maligowen replied in a frightened tone.

"Then your spirit will wander lost between worlds, and your body will remain here, empty." Nokomis spoke without softness, without comfort. *"This is why I tell you the truth, child. This is why you must choose freely. No one can force you to walk this path. Not your father, not the spirits, not even the needs of your tribe. This choice must be yours alone."*

Maligowen looked at the glowing powder in her grandmother's hand. Every instinct screamed at her to refuse, to run back to the village and pretend she was still just a girl learning to scrape hides and gather herbs. But she knew that girl was already gone, had vanished the moment the spirit spoke her name in the clearing.

"What if I refuse?" she asked. *"What if I choose not to accept this gift?"*

"Then the visions will come anyway, unbidden and uncontrolled. You will have no protection, no understanding, no way to close the door once it has been opened." Nokomis closed her hand around the powder. *"The spirit was right—you must die to your old life. But you can choose how that death happens. You can walk into it with preparation and guidance, or you can let it take you by surprise."*

The choice, Maligowen realized, was an illusion. There was only one path forward, only one way through the darkness that was gathering around her. She thought of her father's faith in her, of the strangers camped by the river, of the spirit's words about trials and leadership.

"Tell me what I must do," she said, her voice steadier than she felt.

Pride flickered across Nokomis's weathered face. *"Tonight, when the moon rises, you will drink this mixed with water from the sacred spring. I will prepare the circle and keep watch over your body. But your spirit—your spirit must make its own journey. I cannot guide you there. I can only make sure you have a body to return to when it is finished."*

"Will I die?" The question came out smaller than Maligowen intended.

"In a way, yes. The child you are will not return. But someone stronger, someone with purpose and power, will come back in your place." Nokomis stood, her joints popping. *"Go now. Spend the day with your family. Say nothing of what we have discussed. Tonight, when you hear the owl call three times, come to this place alone."*

Maligowen returned to the village in a daze, her mind spinning with everything Nokomis had told her. The council had finished their deliberations—they would send scouts to watch the strangers but make no contact yet. Her father had decided to increase the watch around the village and prepare for the possibility of conflict.

She found Makwa and Wapan practicing with their bows at the edge of the village, sending arrows into a target made of bundled reeds. They called to her, and she joined them, grateful for the normalcy of it, for the simple pleasure of notching an arrow and feeling the bow's tension in her arms.

"You were gone a long time with Nokomis," Makwa commented, his arrow thudding into the target's center. *"Everything alright?"*

"Just... woman's things," Maligowen said, using the excuse that always made her brothers uncomfortable enough to stop asking questions.

Wapan made a face. *"Too much information, little sister."*

They practiced until the sun was high, and Maligowen allowed herself to simply be with her brothers, to feel the cold air on her face and the satisfaction of a well-placed shot. This might be the last day she spent as simply their sister, the last day before everything changed. She wanted to remember it, to hold it close like a precious stone.

Her mother called them for the midday meal, and they ate together in the lodge—smoked fish and corn porridge sweetened with maple sugar. Her father spoke of the hunting party he would lead tomorrow, and her mother showed them the new moccasins she had beaded for winter. It was all so ordinary, so familiar, and Maligowen felt tears prick her eyes at the beauty of it.

"What troubles you, daughter?" her mother asked gently, noticing her expression.

"Nothing, Mama. I'm just grateful, that's all. Grateful for all of you."

Her mother smiled, confused but pleased, and stroked Maligowen's hair. *"You have a tender heart. It will serve you well."*

The afternoon passed too quickly. Maligowen helped prepare hides, gathered firewood, and listened to the camp's rhythms—children playing, women singing work songs, men discussing the strangers and what their presence might mean. Life continuing, ordinary and precious and about to change forever.

As the sun began to set, painting the sky in shades of orange and purple, Maligowen felt her pulse quicken. Soon. Soon the owl would call, and she would walk into the cedar grove and drink the spirit root, and whatever happened after that would shape not just her life but the life of her entire tribe.

She thought of the spirit's words: *Your people will face trials unlike any they have known. They will need a leader who can walk in both worlds.*

Was she strong enough? Brave enough? She was only eleven seasons old, still learning, still growing. How could she possibly be what the spirits needed her to be?

But then she remembered her father's words from days ago: *You have never been 'just' anything.*

Perhaps that was true. Perhaps she had been preparing for this her entire life without knowing it. Every skill learned, every moment of strangeness, every time she had felt different from others, all of it leading to this night, this choice, this transformation.

Darkness fell, and with it came the cold. Maligowen dressed warmly and waited, her heart beating like a drum in her chest. Her family settled in for the night, and she lay on her sleeping robes, pretending to rest while her mind raced with anticipation and fear.

Then it came...soft and distant, but unmistakable. The call of an owl, three times.

Maligowen rose silently, slipping out of the lodge like a shadow. The village was quiet, most fires banked for the night. She moved between the lodges, past the sentries who nodded at her familiar form, and into the forest path that led to the cedar grove.

The trees seemed to glow in the moonlight, their branches silver-bright. Maligowen's breath misted in the cold air as she walked, and with each step, she felt herself moving away from the world she knew and toward something vast and unknowable.

Nokomis waited in the grove, a small fire burning in the center of the stone circle. She had drawn symbols in white clay around the clearing—the four directions, the spiral of life, signs of protection Maligowen recognized from sacred ceremonies. In her hand, she held

a clay bowl filled with dark liquid that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it.

"You came," Nokomis said simply.

"Did you doubt I would?"

"No. But I hoped perhaps the spirits would change their minds, would choose someone older, stronger." The old woman's voice cracked. *"You are so young, little one."*

"I'm ready," Maligowen said, and was surprised to find it was true.

Nokomis handed her the bowl. *"Drink all of it. Then lie down on the stone. I will keep the fire burning and watch over you until you return. No matter what you see or feel, remember, you are Maligowen, daughter of Mistahi-maskwa, granddaughter of Nokomis. You are of the Cree, of the people who have walked this land since the first sun rose. That truth will anchor you when all else seems lost."*

Maligowen raised the bowl to her lips. The liquid smelled of earth and smoke and something ancient, something that had existed before humans gave names to things. She met her grandmother's eyes one last time, saw love and fear and pride there, and then she drank.

The taste was bitter and sweet simultaneously, coating her tongue and throat like honey mixed with ash. She drained the bowl and handed it back to Nokomis, then lay down on the cold stone altar.

For a moment, nothing happened. The stars wheeled overhead, bright and distant. The fire crackled. Nokomis's lips moved in prayer.

Then the world tilted.

Maligowen felt herself falling, though her body remained on the stone. She was dropping through layers of reality like a stone through water, each layer a different shade of darkness. She tried to cry out,

but she had no voice. Tried to reach for something solid, but she had no hands.

Don't fight it, came a voice that might have been the spirit from the clearing or might have been her own deepest knowing. *Let yourself fall. The ancestors will catch you.*

So Maligowen surrendered. She stopped fighting, stopped trying to hold onto the world she knew, and let herself plunge into the darkness. And as she fell, she finally, truly, began to understand what it meant to walk between worlds.

The vision had begun.



Chapter 4:

Loss and Transformation

The darkness gave way to light—not the warm orange glow of firelight or the silver wash of moonlight, but a luminescence that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. Maligowen found herself standing in a forest that was familiar yet utterly foreign. The trees were the same species she had known all her life, birch and cedar, pine and oak, but they glowed from within, their bark pulsing with veins of light like living blood.

She looked down at her hands and saw they too were luminous, semi-transparent, as if she were made of mist given form. When she tried to speak, her voice echoed strangely, seeming to come from multiple directions at once.

"Hello?" The word rippled outward like waves on water.

"Welcome, little walker." The voice came from behind her, and Maligowen spun to find the spirit from the clearing, but clearer now, more solid. She could see the face beneath the hood—ageless, beautiful, and terrible all at once. Neither male nor female, neither young nor old, but somehow all things simultaneously. *"You have crossed the threshold. Now you must walk the path."*

"What path?" Maligowen asked, though part of her already knew.

"The path all spirit walkers must travel. The path of loss, of understanding, of rebirth." The spirit gestured, and the glowing forest shifted around them, reshaping itself. *"You must witness what has been, what is, and what may yet be. Only then can you carry the wisdom your people will need."*

The forest dissolved, and Maligowen found herself standing at the edge of her village. But something was wrong. Smoke rose from multiple lodges...not the gentle smoke of cooking fires but thick, black clouds that spoke of destruction. She heard screaming.

"No," she whispered, trying to run forward, but her feet wouldn't move. *"What's happening?"*

"Watch," the spirit commanded. *"This is what your mind fears most. Face it."*

The scene unfolded before her like a nightmare made real. The strangers—many more than the twelve her father's scouts had reported—swept through the village like a flood. Their metal weapons thundered with sounds that split the air, and where the weapons pointed, people fell. She saw neighbors, friends, children she had played with, all running, screaming, dying.

And there...her father, standing at the center of the village with his war club raised, rallying warriors to defend their home. Makwa and Wapan fought beside him, their bows singing. But the strangers' weapons reached farther, struck faster, and one by one, the defenders fell.

"Father!" Maligowen screamed, but no one could hear her. She was a ghost in her own vision, forced to witness but unable to act.

She watched her father take a wound to his shoulder, saw him stagger but remain standing. Watched Makwa throw himself in front of their father, taking the blow meant for him. Watched her brother

fall, his blood staining the earth she had walked on every day of her life.

"No, no, no!" Maligowen collapsed to her knees, tears streaming down her translucent face. *"Please, make it stop!"*

"This is one possible future," the spirit said, its voice neither cruel nor kind, simply factual. *"If your people face the strangers with only weapons and rage, this is what may come to pass. Your father is strong, your brothers brave, but they do not understand what approaches. They cannot fight what they do not comprehend."*

The scene shifted again. Now Maligowen stood in the sacred grove, but it was winter, and snow covered everything. A figure lay on the stone altar—small, still, covered in frost. With growing horror, she recognized her own face, peaceful in death, as if she had simply fallen asleep and never woken.

"What is this?" she demanded.

"Another possibility. If you fail to return from this vision, if you lose yourself between worlds as others have before you, your body will remain empty. Your grandmother will keep vigil for three days and three nights, but when the fourth morning comes and you still have not returned, she will know you are lost. Your family will mourn you. Your tribe will lose the guide they need."

"I don't want this!" Maligowen shouted at the spirit. *"I don't want to die! I don't want to watch my family die! Why are you showing me this?"*

"Because you must understand what hangs in the balance. Because you must know the cost of failure—and the cost of success." The spirit moved closer, and Maligowen could feel ancient power radiating from it like heat from a fire. *"You asked to understand your purpose. This is it. You are the bridge between what was and what will be. You are the one who must help your people navigate the*

great change that comes. But first, you must be willing to let go of who you were."

The scene shifted a third time, and Maligowen stood on a high cliff overlooking a vast landscape. She could see her village far below, tiny and fragile. But she could also see beyond it, see other villages, other tribes, see the strangers spreading across the land like water seeping through cracks in stone. She saw years pass in moments, saw seasons turn, saw her people struggling, adapting, surviving.

And there, throughout it all, she saw herself...older, stronger, marked with symbols she didn't yet understand. She saw herself walking between camps, speaking words that brought peace. Saw herself standing before councils, sharing visions that guided decisions. Saw herself with hands raised, calling on spirits to aid her people in times of greatest need.

"This is what you can become," the spirit said. "If you are willing to pay the price."

"What price?" Maligowen asked, though she was beginning to understand.

"The child you are must die. The simple dreams—of family, of a normal life, of growing old in peace...these must be surrendered. You will walk alone in ways others cannot. You will carry burdens that will break you again and again, and each time you must find the strength to rise. You will be respected, feared, needed, but rarely truly known. This is the price of power, of purpose, of walking between worlds."

Maligowen looked out over the vast landscape, feeling the weight of it all pressing down on her. She thought of Makwa's protective embrace, of Wapan's teasing laughter, of her mother's gentle hands braiding her hair. She thought of the simple joy of hunting in the forest, of scraping hides by the fire, of being just a girl with nothing more complicated to worry about than whether the fish would bite or the berries be sweet.

All of that would be gone. She understood that now. The moment she said yes, the moment she accepted this path, that simpler life would end forever.

But she also thought of the vision of her father falling, of Makwa's blood on the ground, of her people scattered and broken. She thought of the empty shell her body would become if she refused, of Nokomis keeping vigil over a grandchild who would never wake.

"I accept," she whispered.

The spirit nodded slowly. *"Then let the old self die. Let the transformation begin."*

The cliff dissolved beneath Maligowen's feet, and she was falling again...but this time, the fall felt different. It felt like shedding skin, like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon, like a snake sliding out of scales that had grown too tight. She felt pieces of herself breaking away, dissolving into light—her fears, her simple dreams, the child who had believed the world was safe and small.

And as those pieces fell away, something new rushed in to fill the space. Power. Knowledge. Connection to something vast and ancient. She felt the presence of countless spirits—ancestors who had walked before her, guardians of the land, the Great Spirit itself watching with interest as this new walker took her first true steps between worlds.

Images flooded her mind—not just of her own tribe but of others across the vast land. She saw the sweep of history, saw the cycles of rise and fall, saw the great web of connection that bound all living things. She understood suddenly that her people were not alone, that the strangers were not simply evil, that the world was far more complex and beautiful and terrible than she had ever imagined.

She saw Nokomis as a young woman, receiving her own vision. Saw her grandmother's teacher before her, and that woman's teacher before her—an unbroken line of medicine keepers stretching back to

the beginning of memory. And now she was part of that line, adding her thread to the great tapestry.

"You are remade," the spirit said, and Maligowen realized she was standing in the glowing forest again, but she was different now. Her form was more solid, more real. The light didn't just surround her—it flowed through her, part of her essential nature. "You are no longer simply Maligowen, Ghost Traveler. You are âcahk-mînowêsiw—Spirit Walker. You move between the worlds of flesh and spirit, of past and future, of what is and what might be."

"How do I return?" Maligowen asked, her new name settling into her bones like a blessing and a burden.

"Follow the thread that binds you to your body. It will be thin, fragile. You must move carefully, must not lose your way. And remember—" The spirit's form began to fade. "This is only the beginning. Each time you walk between worlds, it will become easier, but also more dangerous. You must learn when to cross and when to stay firmly rooted in flesh. You must learn to close the door you have opened, or you will lose yourself to the spirit world entirely."

"Wait!" Maligowen called. "I need to know—the vision of my father, of my brothers...is it real? Will it happen?"

"All things are possible until the moment chooses its path. Your vision showed one future. But futures can be changed, Spirit Walker. That is why you were chosen. That is why you must return."

The spirit vanished completely, and Maligowen was alone in the glowing forest. She closed her eyes—or what passed for eyes in this place, and reached inward, searching for the connection to her physical body. There it is...so thin she almost missed it, a silver thread leading back through the layers of reality she had traversed.

She began to follow it, moving through the darkness again, but this time with purpose and direction. She passed through layers of

spirit, through the dreams of sleeping animals, through the slow thoughts of ancient trees, through the memories of the land itself. And with each layer, she felt herself becoming more solid, more physical, more real.

Until finally, with a gasp that burned her lungs, she opened her eyes to find herself lying on the stone altar in the cedar grove. The fire had burned low. The sky was lightening with the first hint of dawn. And Nokomis sat beside her, tears streaming down her weathered face.

"Grandmother," Maligowen whispered, her voice hoarse.

"Oh, child," Nokomis sobbed, reaching for her. *"You were gone so long. I thought...I feared—"*

"I know." Maligowen sat up slowly, her body feeling strange, as if she were wearing clothing that didn't quite fit. Everything seemed both sharper and more distant than before. She could see the individual particles of smoke rising from the fire, could hear the heartbeat of the earth beneath the stone, could feel the presence of spirits hovering at the edges of perception. *"But I'm back. I'm changed, but I'm back."*

Nokomis helped her stand, and Maligowen swayed, dizzy with the effort of being fully physical again. She looked down at her hands...solid, real, but marked now with faint lines that glowed softly in the pre-dawn light, visible only when she focused on them. The marks of one who had walked between worlds and returned.

"Come," Nokomis said gently. *"We must get you warm and fed. And then..."* She paused, her expression growing grave. *"And then you must tell your father what you saw. Because while you journeyed, runners came from the south. The strangers have moved their camp. They are coming toward the village."*

Maligowen felt the weight of prophecy settle on her shoulders like a physical thing. The vision of fire and blood, of her father and brothers falling, of her people scattered, it was not just possibility. It was approaching reality.

But now she had the power to change it. Now she was âcahk-mînowêsiw, Spirit Walker, bridge between worlds. Now she could fight not just with weapons but with wisdom, with foresight, with the guidance of ancestors who had faced their own impossible challenges and survived.

The child she had been was dead. But something stronger had been born in her place.

And that something was exactly what her people needed.

She let Nokomis lead her back toward the village, toward her family, toward the approaching crisis. The sun broke over the horizon, painting the world in shades of gold and crimson. A new day. A new life.

The transformation was complete.



Chapter 5:

The Spirit World Opens

The village was already awake when Maligowen and Nokomis returned, the early morning air filled with the controlled chaos of preparation. Warriors checked weapons, women packed essential supplies, and children huddled close to their mothers, sensing the tension that rippled through the camp like wind across water. Everyone knew the strangers were coming. No one knew what that would mean.

Maligowen's father stood at the center of the village, speaking with the council elders. When he saw her approaching, his words faltered mid-sentence. His eyes widened, and she realized he could see the change in her—not just in her bearing but in something more fundamental. The way light seemed to cling to her skin. The way her eyes reflected colors that shouldn't exist in the physical world.

"Daughter," he said quietly, and the council members fell silent, turning to look at her.

Maligowen felt their stares like physical weight. Some faces showed wonder, others fear. Old Napew, who had always been kind to her, actually took a step backward, his hand rising in a warding gesture. The division had already begun.

"I need to speak with you, Father," Maligowen said, her voice carrying strangely in the morning air—as if multiple versions of her

spoke in harmony. *"Privately. What I saw in the vision... it concerns everyone."*

Mistahi-maskwa nodded, though she could see tension in his shoulders. *"We will talk. But first—"* He gestured to the gathered people who had stopped their work to stare at her. *"They need to understand what has happened. They need to hear it from you."*

Maligowen hadn't expected this, hadn't prepared words for such a moment. But as she looked at the faces of her people—people she had known all her life, who had watched her grow from infant to child to... whatever she was now—she understood her father's wisdom. Fear grew in darkness and silence. Truth, even frightening truth, was better than imagination.

"I am still Maligowen," she began, her voice steady. *"Still daughter of Mistahi-maskwa, still of the Cree people. But I am also changed. Last night, I walked between the worlds of flesh and spirit. I have been given the gift—and the burden—of seeing what others cannot see, of hearing the voices of those who have passed beyond, of understanding the threads that connect all things."*

"She has become âcahk-mînowêsiw," Nokomis announced, her voice carrying the weight of authority. *"Spirit Walker. Only the fifth in my lifetime to receive such a calling. The ancestors have chosen her to guide us through the great changes that approach."*

Murmurs rippled through the crowd. Some people nodded, faces alight with something between awe and hope. But others frowned, whispered among themselves. Maligowen could hear fragments: *"...too young..." "...unnatural..." "...what does this mean for us..."*

A woman named Iskwew, whose son had been born twisted and in pain, dying before his first winter, pushed to the front of the crowd. Her face was hard with old grief and new anger. *"The spirits did not save my child,"* she said, her voice sharp as flint. *"Why should we*

trust they will save us now? Why should we believe this... this girl has any power to help us?"

The words struck Maligowen like a physical blow. She opened her mouth to respond, but before she could, something shifted at the edge of her vision. The world flickered, and suddenly she could see Iskwew not just as she was but layered with other images—Iskwew as a young woman, laughing and full of hope; Iskwew cradling her dying infant, her heart breaking; and hovering near her shoulder, a small spirit-form, the child who had passed, still connected to his mother by threads of love and grief.

Without thinking, Maligowen spoke. *"Your son is still with you, Iskwew. He walks beside you even now. He knows you loved him. He wants you to know that his pain is ended, that he is at peace in the spirit world, and that one day you will hold him again when you cross over."*

The silence that fell was absolute. Iskwew's face went white, then red, then crumpled. She fell to her knees, sobbing—whether in relief or rage or some mixture of both, Maligowen couldn't tell.

"How dare you," someone hissed—Iskwew's sister, Pakwatum. *"How dare you speak of things you cannot know, use her grief for—"*

"Peace, sister," Iskwew said, her voice shaking but firm. She looked up at Maligowen with tears streaming down her face. *"She speaks truth. I have felt him near me, especially in the quiet moments. I thought it was only wishful thinking, the desperate imagination of a grieving mother. But if the Spirit Walker can see him, if he is truly there..."* She pressed her hands to her chest. *"Then my heart can begin to heal."*

The crowd's mood shifted, became more uncertain. Maligowen felt them wavering between fear and faith, caught between the familiar world they understood and the strange new reality she represented.

"Father," she said quietly, turning back to Mistahi-maskwa. "We need to talk. Now."

He nodded and led her to his lodge, with Nokomis and the council elders following. Inside, in the warm dimness lit by the central fire, Maligowen told them everything—the vision of the village burning, of Makwa falling to protect his father, of the strangers' weapons that killed from distance, of the possible futures branching like river tributaries.

"Can we prevent it?" Makwa asked. He had been silent until now, sitting beside Wapan, both brothers watching her with expressions she couldn't quite read. *"This vision of death—can it be changed?"*

"All futures can be changed until the moment chooses its path," Maligowen said, echoing the spirit's words. *"But we cannot face the strangers with weapons alone. Their tools are more powerful than ours. Their numbers may be greater. We need wisdom, strategy, and..."* She hesitated, knowing this would be hardest to accept. *"We need to consider that fighting may not be the answer."*

Several of the council members erupted in protest. *"Not fight?"* old Nipiy demanded. *"When they come to take our land? When they..."*

"I did not say we surrender," Maligowen interrupted, surprised by the authority in her own voice. *"I said fighting may not be the answer. There are other ways. Diplomacy. Alliance with other tribes. Strategic retreat. Or..."* She closed her eyes, reaching for the threads of possibility she had sensed in the spirit world. *"Or we use the gifts the spirits have given us. We use what they cannot understand to our advantage."*

"You speak in riddles, daughter," her father said, but his tone was thoughtful rather than dismissive.

Before Maligowen could explain further, the world flickered again. The lodge walls became translucent, and she could see through them to the spirit realm overlaying the physical. And there, gathered around them like witnesses to a sacred ceremony, stood the ancestors—dozens of them, perhaps hundreds, translucent forms stretching back through generations. She recognized some from stories: the great chief who had united three tribes, the medicine woman who had survived the winter of no sun, the warrior who had faced a bear with nothing but a knife and won.

And at the front, closest to her, stood a figure she had seen in Nokomis's stories...her own great-great-grandmother, who had also been a Spirit Walker, who had guided the people through a plague that had killed half their number.

"You see them," Nokomis whispered, watching Maligowen's face. *"Don't you? The ancestors."*

"Yes," Maligowen breathed. *"They're here. They're always here, watching over us."*

"What do they say?" her father asked, leaning forward.

Maligowen listened, not with her ears but with something deeper. The ancestors didn't speak in words but in feelings, in impressions, in knowledge that flowed into her mind like water into a cup.

"They say..." She struggled to translate the wordless communication. *"They say the strangers are like a flood. You cannot stop a flood by fighting it. But you can guide it, channel it, redirect it away from what is most precious. They say some of our people will need to adapt, to learn the strangers' ways while keeping our own hearts true. They say this is not the end of our people but a transformation, painful but necessary."*

"Adapt?" Makwa's voice was tight. *"Become like them?"*

"No," Maligowen said, meeting her brother's eyes. "Learn from them while teaching them. Show them we are not savages to be swept aside but people with our own wisdom, our own power. Make them see us as too valuable to destroy, too strong to conquer easily." She turned to her father. *"But we must move quickly. The strangers will reach our camp by tomorrow's sunset. We have one day to prepare."*

The council erupted into debate, voices overlapping as people argued strategy, retreat, resistance. Maligowen let them talk, her attention drifting between the physical and spiritual realms. She was learning to navigate the boundary, to exist in both worlds simultaneously. It was exhausting, like trying to focus on two distant objects at once, but she could feel herself growing stronger with each passing moment.

Wapan caught her eye and gestured toward the lodge entrance. She followed him outside, grateful for the escape from the heated discussion.

"You're different," he said simply, once they were alone. Not accusatory, just observational.

"I know."

"Does it hurt? Being able to see... all of that?" He waved his hand vaguely at the air, as if trying to indicate the invisible realm she now perceived.

Maligowen considered the question. *"Sometimes. It's like... like trying to listen to ten conversations at once. And some of the spirits are in pain, or angry, or lost. I can feel all of it."* She looked at her brother, at the concern in his familiar face. *"But I also feel their love, their hope, their faith in us. That makes it bearable."*

"I don't understand any of this," Wapan admitted. *"Spirits and visions and walking between worlds. But I understand you, little*

sister. And I trust you." He squeezed her shoulder. *"Even if you do glow sometimes."*

Despite everything, Maligowen laughed. It felt good, that moment of normalcy with her brother. A reminder that not everything had changed, that she was still connected to the people she loved.

But the moment was brief. Makwa emerged from the lodge, his face set in hard lines. "Father wants you to demonstrate your gift to the council. Some of them think you're lying, making up stories to gain attention."

Anger flashed through Maligowen, hot and sudden. But beneath it, she felt the gentle pressure of the ancestors' presence, counseling patience.

"Very well," she said. *"Ask them to come outside. All of them."*

When the council had gathered, Maligowen stood before them, feeling the weight of their skepticism and fear. She closed her eyes and reached deliberately into the spirit realm, pulling herself halfway across the threshold.

The change was visible to everyone. Her form became partially translucent, light radiating from her skin. The markings on her hands glowed bright enough to see even in daylight. Around her, the air shimmered with otherworldly energy, and those with any spiritual sensitivity at all could see the vague shapes of the ancestors gathering close.

Gasps of fear and wonder rippled through the crowd that had formed to watch. Some people fell to their knees. Others made protective signs. But no one could deny what they were seeing.

"I am âcahk-mînowêsiw," Maligowen said, her voice echoing with harmonics that didn't come from human vocal cords. *"I walk between flesh and spirit. I carry the wisdom of those who came before and the vision of what may come. You may fear me. You may doubt me. But*

you cannot deny that I have been changed, that I have been given this gift for a purpose."

She pulled herself fully back into the physical realm, and the glow faded, though not entirely. Some trace of the spirit world would always cling to her now, visible to those who looked closely.

The council members looked shaken. Old Napew was the first to speak. *"Forgive my doubt, Spirit Walker. We have never seen such a thing in our lifetimes. But the ancestors have clearly chosen you."* He bowed his head. *"How do we prepare for what comes?"*

"We start," Maligowen said, feeling exhaustion creeping over her as the adrenaline faded, *"by understanding that we face not just strangers with weapons, but the first wave of a great change. We must be flexible, clever, and united. We must use every advantage we have—including gifts they cannot comprehend."*

Her father stepped forward, and she saw pride and sorrow mingling in his eyes. Pride in what she had become, sorrow for the childhood she had lost. *"Then we will follow your guidance, daughter. The ancestors have spoken through you. We would be fools to ignore their wisdom."*

But even as the council nodded agreement, Maligowen could see the division in her people's faces. Those who revered her stood a little straighter, looked at her with awe and hope. Those who feared her kept their distance, their expressions wary, uncomfortable with this breach of natural law.

She was only eleven seasons old, but she had died and been reborn. She was Spirit Walker now, bridge between worlds, voice of the ancestors. And whether her people trusted her or feared her, she would do everything in her power to guide them through the storm that was coming.

Even if it cost her everything she had left to lose.



Chapter 6:

The Threat from Outside

The day passed in a blur of frantic preparation. Warriors sharpened weapons and reinforced bows. Women and children gathered supplies that could be carried quickly if retreat became necessary. The elderly and the very young were moved to the safest lodges, those farthest from the likely approach routes. Everyone moved with purpose, but Maligowen could feel the undercurrent of fear running through the camp like a cold stream.

She spent the morning in meditation with Nokomis, learning to control the flow between worlds. The old woman taught her techniques passed down through generations of medicine keepers—how to anchor herself in the physical when the spirit world threatened to pull her away, how to call upon specific ancestors rather than being overwhelmed by all of them at once, how to shield her mind from spirits that might be hostile or simply too chaotic to be helpful.

"The gift will try to consume you if you let it," Nokomis warned, pressing a small bundle of herbs into Maligowen's hand. *"Burn this when you need to close the door between worlds. It will give you respite, allow you to simply be human for a time. Even Spirit Walkers need rest."*

By midday, scouts returned with troubling news. The strangers had indeed broken camp and were moving directly toward the village.

But their numbers had grown—not twelve, but closer to thirty men, all armed with the thunder-weapons that had filled Maligowen's vision. And they were moving with purpose, as if they knew exactly where they were going.

"Someone has been watching us," Mistahi-maskwa said grimly to the gathered council. *"They know where our village stands, how many we are. This is not a chance encounter. This is deliberate."*

Maligowen felt the spirit world pressing at her awareness, ancestors clamoring for attention. She let herself slip partially across, just enough to perceive their urgent messages.

"They come with maps," she said, the words flowing through her from the spirits who had been observing the strangers. *"Drawings that show the land, the lakes, the rivers. They seek to claim it, to mark it as their own. They believe this land is empty, unused, free for taking."*

"Empty?" Makwa's voice was incredulous. *"Our people have walked this land for generations beyond counting. How can they think it empty?"*

"Because they do not see us as people," Maligowen said quietly, the terrible truth settling over her like ash. *"To them, we are... obstacles. Inconveniences. They see the land and its riches, but not those who live in harmony with it."*

The council chamber fell silent. It was one thing to face an enemy who hated you, another entirely to face one who simply didn't acknowledge your existence as meaningful.

"Then we make them see us," Wapan said, his young face hard with determination. *"We show them we are not nothing. We fight."*

"If we fight, we die," Maligowen said bluntly, and the vision from the spirit realm flashed before her eyes again—Makwa falling, her

father wounded, the village burning. *"I have seen it. Their weapons are too powerful, their numbers too great for direct confrontation."*

"So we run?" Old Nipiy demanded. *"Abandon our homes, our sacred places, everything we have built?"*

"No," Mistahi-maskwa said slowly, his eyes on his daughter. *"We do something they will not expect. Something that will confuse them, make them uncertain."* He stood, his presence commanding the room. *"We welcome them."*

The explosion of protest was immediate and loud. But the chief raised his hand, and slowly, grudgingly, the voices quieted.

"Not as conquerors," he clarified. *"Not as masters. But as... visitors. Strangers who have lost their way. We show them hospitality, the sacred duty of all our people. We feed them, show them kindness, and in doing so, we learn about them. Their weaknesses. Their intentions. Their fears."*

"And while we smile and feed them, they study us," Pakwatum said bitterly. *"Learn our weaknesses. Plan how best to destroy us."*

"Perhaps," Mistahi-maskwa acknowledged. *"But they are already coming. They are already armed. Fighting them on their terms means death. So we change the terms. We make this an encounter of peace, not war. And if they prove hostile despite our hospitality..."* He touched his war club. *"Then we will know their true nature, and we will be ready."*

Maligowen reached into the spirit realm again, seeking guidance from the ancestors. She felt their approval, their recognition of her father's wisdom. This was the way...not submission, but strategy. Not weakness, but a different kind of strength.

"The ancestors agree," she said. *"This is the path that offers the most possible futures. If we fight immediately, the path narrows to only death and destruction. If we welcome them, many paths open."*

Some lead to peace, some to conflict, but all give us more choices than we have now."

The council debated for another hour, but eventually her father's will—backed by Maligowen's spiritual authority—prevailed. They would prepare to welcome the strangers with a feast, would show them the Cree way of hospitality and honor. But they would also be ready for betrayal, would keep weapons close and escape routes clear.

As the council dispersed to make preparations, Maligowen found herself alone with her father and brothers. Makwa had been silent during most of the debate, his face troubled.

"You don't agree with Father's plan," Maligowen said to him.

"I don't trust them," Makwa replied. *"Everything in my spirit says they mean us harm. Welcoming them feels like inviting a wolf into the lodge and hoping it won't eat the children."*

"Your spirit is not wrong," Maligowen said gently. *"They do mean harm, in their way. But not all of them, and not immediately. They are lost, confused, far from their own lands. Some of them are cruel, yes. But some are simply afraid, just as we are afraid."* She reached out and took her brother's hand. *"I saw you die in my vision, Makwa. Die protecting Father from their weapons. I will do anything—anything—to prevent that future from becoming real."*

Makwa's expression softened. He pulled her into a fierce embrace. *"I'm sorry, little sister. I forget sometimes that you carry burdens now that I cannot imagine. If you say this is the way, then I will follow. But I will also be ready to fight if your path of peace fails."*

"I would expect nothing less," Maligowen said, returning the embrace.

The afternoon was spent in preparation of a different kind. The women prepared food, smoked fish, venison stew, corn cakes sweetened with maple sugar, berries preserved in fat. Enough to feed

thirty strangers and show the abundance the land provided. The best furs were brought out, the finest craftwork displayed. If they were to make an impression, it would be one of a people who were wealthy in the ways that mattered, who had no need of whatever the strangers might offer.

Maligowen helped where she could, but she found herself constantly distracted by the spirit realm. The ancestors were agitated, swirling around the village in greater numbers than she had ever seen. They knew what was coming, had seen countless such encounters across the vast land. Some of those encounters had ended in peace, in mutual understanding. Others had ended in blood and betrayal.

As the sun began its descent toward the horizon, the scouts returned with urgent news. The strangers were less than an hour away, moving along the lake shore path. It was time.

Mistahi-maskwa assembled the people in the center of the village. Maligowen stood at his right hand, Nokomis at his left. The warriors arranged themselves casually around the perimeter—close enough to respond to threat but not in formation that would appear hostile. The women and children stood in groups, watching with wary eyes.

"Remember," the chief said, his voice carrying to all gathered. "We are Cree. We are proud, strong, and wise. We do not cower, but neither do we strike first without cause. Today we show these strangers who we are. We show them that this land is not empty, that it belongs to a people with honor and power." His eyes swept across his people. "And we watch. We listen. We learn. And we prepare for whatever truth reveals itself."

The sound reached them first—voices speaking in that harsh, incomprehensible language, the clank of metal on metal, the heavy tread of feet unaccustomed to moving quietly through the forest.

Then they appeared at the tree line, a group of men unlike any Maligowen had seen even in her visions.

They were tall, most of them, with skin pale as birch bark and hair in shades of dried grass and autumn leaves. They wore clothing of heavy woven fabric, dyed in unnatural colors—deep blues and bright reds. Metal tools hung from their waists, and several carried the long thunder-weapons across their shoulders. They moved with the awkwardness of people in unfamiliar territory, their eyes darting nervously at the forest around them.

At their head walked a man with a full beard the color of rust, his pale eyes sharp with intelligence. He wore finer clothing than the others and carried himself with authority. When he saw the assembled tribe waiting for them, he stopped abruptly, his hand moving to the weapon at his waist.

For a long moment, the two groups simply stared at each other across the distance. Maligowen could feel the tension crackling in the air like lightning before a storm. One wrong move, one misunderstood gesture, and everything could explode into violence.

Her father stepped forward slowly, his hands open and empty, showing he bore no weapon. He spoke in the Cree tongue, his voice calm and welcoming, though the strangers clearly couldn't understand the words. But tone carried meaning across language barriers, and hospitality was a universal concept.

The bearded man watched Mistahi-maskwa carefully, his expression wary but not hostile. He said something to his companions in their own language, then stepped forward as well, also showing empty hands.

The two leaders met in the middle of the clearing, and Maligowen held her breath. The spirit realm was churning with energy, ancestors pressing close, waiting to see which path this moment would choose.

Her father gestured to the village, to the fires where food was cooking, to the people waiting with guarded welcome. He placed his hand over his heart, then extended it toward the strangers in a gesture of greeting.

The bearded man studied him for a long moment, then slowly returned the gesture. He spoke again in his harsh tongue, and Maligowen reached into the spirit realm, seeking understanding. The ancestors who had encountered such strangers before whispered to her, translating not the specific words but the intent behind them.

"He says his name is Duncan," Maligowen called out, surprised by her own certainty. *"He says they come from across the great water, seeking land and resources. He says they mean no harm to those who do not resist them."*

Every head turned to stare at her. The strangers looked shocked, perhaps thinking she had somehow learned their language. Her own people looked to her with a mixture of awe and unease.

Duncan—if that was truly his name—stared at her with intense focus. He said something else, a question by his tone.

"He asks how I understand him," Maligowen translated, the words flowing through her from the spirit realm. *"He asks if I am a witch."*

A ripple of laughter passed through some of the Cree at the strange word, though the tension remained high. Mistahi-maskwa spoke again, and Maligowen found herself translating almost without thinking, the gift of the ancestors flowing through her.

"My father says I am Spirit Walker, one who speaks with the ancestors and travels between worlds. He says you are welcome to share our fire and food, to rest from your journey. He says we are Cree, the people of this land, and we wish to understand why you have come to our home."

Duncan's eyes narrowed, suspicion and fascination warring on his face. He spoke again, longer this time, and Maligowen struggled to capture all the meaning.

"He says... they come to claim this land for their king, a great chief across the water. They will build settlements, bring more of their people, trade for furs and resources. He says those who cooperate will be rewarded. Those who resist will be..." She paused, the implications of the word making her stomach turn. *"Removed."*

The last word hung in the air like a death sentence. Maligowen saw her father's jaw tighten, saw the warriors shift their weight, hands moving closer to weapons. The fragile peace balanced on a knife's edge.

"Tell him," Mistahi-maskwa said carefully, *"that this land has belonged to our people since the first sun rose. That we do not recognize his king's claim. But tell him also that we are not foolish. We see his weapons, his numbers, and know more will come. Tell him we wish to speak of how our peoples might live in peace, how we might both benefit from cooperation rather than conflict."*

Maligowen translated, pulling words from the spirit realm, speaking in the strangers' tongue though she had never learned it. The ancestors guided her voice, and she felt the weight of countless similar encounters flowing through her—moments where the fate of peoples hung in balance.

Duncan listened, his expression unreadable. When she finished, he was silent for a long moment. Then he spoke again, and this time his tone was more measured, more thoughtful.

"He says he will listen to our words," Maligowen translated. *"He says he will share our fire tonight. He says that tomorrow, decisions will be made. But tonight... tonight there will be peace."*

It wasn't much. It wasn't safety or security or any real promise of future harmony. But it was enough—enough to prevent immediate bloodshed, enough to open a door to possibilities beyond simple violence.

As the strangers were guided to the prepared feast, as food was shared and careful conversations began through Maligowen's translation, she felt the ancestors' approval like warm sunlight. The path was still uncertain, the future still clouded with threats and dangers. But they had taken the first step. They had transformed what might have been a massacre into a meeting.

And somewhere in the space between those two possibilities, Maligowen knew, lay the survival of her people.

The night would be long, the peace fragile, and the morning uncertain. But for now, the Spirit Walker had done what she was meant to do—she had opened a door between worlds, not just of spirit and flesh, but between peoples who spoke different languages, believed different truths, and needed to find a way to share the same land.

Whether that door would lead to understanding or merely delay the inevitable remained to be seen.



Chapter 7:

The Three Trials

The feast lasted deep into the night. Strangers and Cree sat around multiple fires, eating warily but eating together nonetheless. Maligowen moved between the groups, translating through the guidance of ancestors who whispered meanings into her mind. The work was exhausting, each translation requiring her to slip partially into the spirit realm and back again, but she didn't dare stop. Every word she carried between the two peoples was a thread holding the fragile peace together.

She learned much as the evening progressed. Duncan's men were traders and explorers, part of a much larger group that had established a fort three weeks' journey to the south. They sought furs—beaver, fox, marten—that were valuable across the great water. They also sought routes through the land, places to build, resources to claim. And behind their careful words, she sensed hunger—not just for wealth but for something more fundamental. They saw the vast wilderness as opportunity, as empty space waiting to be filled with their presence, their structures, their way of life.

They could not conceive that it was already full—full of peoples, full of meaning, full of spirit.

As the fires burned low and many on both sides retired to rest, Duncan approached Maligowen where she sat with Nokomis, recovering her strength.

"You," he said in his rough tongue, pointing at her. *"Spirit Walker. I would speak with you alone."*

Maligowen glanced at her grandmother, who nodded slightly. She rose and followed Duncan to the edge of the firelight, where they could talk without being overheard. Her father and Makwa watched from a distance, hands near weapons, ready to intervene if needed.

"How old are you, child?" Duncan asked, and Maligowen was struck by genuine curiosity in his tone rather than condescension.

"Eleven seasons—years in your counting," she replied, the translation flowing easily now that she understood the pattern of his language.

Duncan's eyes widened. *"Eleven. And they trust you to speak for them? To translate matters of such importance?"*

"I speak not for myself but through the ancestors," Maligowen said. *"I am only the vessel. The wisdom is theirs."*

He studied her with an intensity that made her uncomfortable. *"In my land, they would call you witch. They would fear you, perhaps try to burn such gifts away."* He paused. *"But I have traveled far, seen much. I know there are more things in this world than my people's priests admit. So I will speak plainly, Spirit Walker. Your people cannot win against what comes. More ships arrive every season. More men with more weapons. The king's hunger for this land is endless. You can resist and be destroyed, or you can bend and survive. Which will you choose?"*

The bluntness stole Maligowen's breath. *"You speak of our destruction as if it were decided. As if we have no say in our own fate."*

"I speak of reality," Duncan replied. "I do not wish you harm. I would prefer cooperation, trade, mutual benefit. But what I prefer and what will happen are not the same thing." He leaned closer. "You have power here, child. I see how they listen to you. Use that power wisely. Help your people see reason before reason is forced upon them."

Before Maligowen could respond, a commotion erupted near one of the fires. Voices rose in anger, and she turned to see one of Duncan's men—a younger one with wild eyes and liquor on his breath—grabbing at one of the Cree women, pulling her toward him with rough hands. The woman struggled, crying out, and immediately warriors surged forward, weapons drawn.

"Stop!" Maligowen's voice cut through the chaos with unexpected force, echoing with harmonics from the spirit realm. Everyone froze. She strode toward the confrontation, slipping partially into the spirit world as she moved, her form beginning to glow with otherworldly light.

The drunk stranger released the woman immediately, stumbling backward with fear written across his face. He said something in his own language—a prayer or curse, Maligowen couldn't tell which.

"This man has broken the sacred law of hospitality," Maligowen announced, her voice carrying to both peoples. *"He has violated the peace we offered, has shown disrespect to one of our women. Among my people, this offense demands justice."*

Duncan pushed through his men, his face dark with anger. He grabbed the offending man by the collar and shook him roughly, speaking in rapid, harsh tones. Then he turned to Maligowen.

"He will be punished. I give you my word. He is drunk and foolish, but the offense is mine to address. He is one of my men."

"No," Mistahi-maskwa said, stepping forward. *"He committed his crime here, against one of ours. We will determine his punishment."*

The two groups tensed immediately, hands moving to weapons. The fragile peace balanced on the edge of shattering completely. Maligowen felt the ancestors pressing urgently at her consciousness, showing her the branching paths—violence leading to more violence, blood calling for blood, the vision of her brother falling becoming more and more likely with each passing heartbeat.

"Wait," she said, and the authority in her voice came from something deeper than her own eleven-year-old certainty. *"This moment is a test. A trial to see if our peoples can find justice together rather than simply adding grievances to be repaid in blood."* She looked at Duncan, then at her father. *"Let there be a trial by ordeal. The old way. Let the spirits judge whether this man's offense is forgiven or demands greater payment."*

"What ordeal?" Duncan asked, suspicion thick in his voice.

Maligowen hadn't planned the words, didn't know where they came from, but she spoke them anyway, trusting the ancestors who guided her tongue. *"Three trials. One of courage, to see if he has the bravery to face consequences. One of strength, to see if he has the fortitude to endure hardship. And one of truth, to see if his heart can acknowledge wrong and seek to make it right. If he passes all three, the offense is forgiven and peace remains. If he fails even one, he is cast out from both our peoples, left to survive on his own in the wilderness."*

The drunk man sobered considerably at these words. Duncan translated for him, and fear flickered across the stranger's face. But he nodded slowly, perhaps seeing it as his only chance to avoid worse punishment.

"What are these trials?" Mistahi-maskwa asked, and Maligowen realized he was trusting her completely, had no more idea what she would propose than anyone else present.

"The first trial begins now," Maligowen said, reaching into the spirit realm for guidance. The ancestors showed her what was needed, what would test this man without destroying him. *"He must walk into the forest alone, at night, unarmed. He must find the sacred grove where I first spoke with the spirits. There, he will wait until dawn. If courage fails him, if he runs or calls out for help, he fails. If he remains until first light, he passes."*

Duncan translated, and the man's face went pale. *"The forest at night? Alone? There are bears, wolves—"*

"Yes," Maligowen said simply. *"That is why it is a trial of courage."*

After a moment's hesitation, the man nodded. He removed his weapons—the long knife at his belt, the smaller blade in his boot—and handed them to Duncan. Then, with every eye upon him, he walked toward the tree line. At the edge, he paused, looked back once at his companions, and disappeared into the darkness.

"If he dies out there—" Duncan began.

"Then he fails the trial," Mistahi-maskwa said coldly. *"As would any of our people who violated sacred hospitality. But the forest will judge him fairly. If his courage is true, he will survive."*

The night that followed was long and tense. No one slept properly, both groups remaining alert, watching each other, waiting to see what dawn would bring. Maligowen sat by the fire with Nokomis, reaching periodically into the spirit realm to check on the man in the forest.

She could see him there, huddled at the base of a great oak near the sacred grove, shaking with cold and fear. Several times animals

passed close—a fox, curious about this strange creature; a deer, watching with liquid eyes; once, terrifyingly, a black bear that sniffed the air near him before moving on. Each time, the man tensed but did not cry out, did not run. His courage, however tremulous, held.

"You are wise beyond your years," Nokomis whispered. "This trial serves many purposes. It tests him, yes, but it also shows both peoples that justice can be found without immediate violence. It buys time for tempers to cool."

"The ancestors guided me," Maligowen admitted. "I didn't plan those words."

"The best wisdom often comes when we stop planning and start listening," her grandmother replied.

Dawn came slowly, painting the sky in shades of pink and gold. As the first rays of sunlight broke above the horizon, the man emerged from the forest. He was scratched, dirty, exhausted, but alive. His eyes had changed—some of the arrogance had been stripped away, replaced by something that might have been newfound respect or at least wariness.

"He has passed the first trial," Maligowen announced. "Now comes the trial of strength."

She led the gathered peoples to the lake shore, where the water was already bitter cold with approaching winter. *"He must swim to the center of the narrows and back. The water will test his body's strength, his will to endure discomfort. If he completes the swim, he passes. If he turns back or must be rescued, he fails."*

The man looked at the grey water, at the distance he would need to swim. He said something to Duncan, who shook his head.

"He says the cold will kill him," Duncan translated.

"Perhaps," Maligowen agreed. "Or perhaps it will teach him that his comfort is not the most important thing in the world. That sometimes we must suffer consequences for our actions."

After a long moment, the man began removing his heavy outer clothing. Down to just his basic garments, he waded into the water. The cold hit him like a physical blow—Maligowen could see it in the way his body seized, his breathing becoming rapid and shallow. But he pushed forward, swimming with determined strokes toward the center of the narrows.

The swim seemed to take forever. Halfway through, the man's strokes became erratic, weakening. Maligowen could see him struggling, could see hypothermia beginning to set in. Several of Duncan's men moved toward the water, ready to rescue him.

"No," Duncan said, holding them back. "He chose this. Let him finish or fail on his own."

Maligowen watched through both physical and spiritual sight, seeing the man's spirit flicker and waver. But something in him—pride, determination, or simple stubborn will—drove him forward. He reached the center, touched the marker stone that rose from the water, and began the return journey.

By the time he dragged himself onto the shore, he was blue with cold, shaking so violently he could barely stand. But he had completed it. The Cree women who had been watching brought blankets and warm stones to help restore his heat, their actions speaking of compassion despite the offense he had committed.

"The second trial is passed," Maligowen said, feeling a strange respect for this man who had violated their hospitality but now suffered to make it right. "Now comes the hardest trial. The trial of truth."

She had the man brought to the center of the village once he had recovered enough to speak. All people gathered around—Cree and strangers alike. Maligowen stood before him, and as she spoke, she allowed herself to slip deeper into the spirit realm, her eyes beginning to glow with otherworldly light.

"In this trial, you cannot hide behind courage or strength," she said, her voice echoing with the power of the ancestors. *"You must speak truth from your heart. You must answer my questions honestly, no matter how it shames you. If you lie, I will see it. The spirits will see it. And you will fail."*

The man nodded, his earlier arrogance completely stripped away.

"Do you understand what you did wrong last night?" Maligowen asked.

"I... I grabbed a woman. Without her consent. Without respect." His voice was hoarse from cold and exhaustion.

"Why did you do it?"

He looked down at his hands. *"Because I've been taught that people like you—"* He gestured at the Cree gathered around. *"That you're not really people. That you're savages, that your women are... available. That this land is empty and everything in it is ours for the taking."*

The honesty of it—the ugly, brutal honesty—sent a ripple through both groups. But Maligowen pressed on.

"And do you still believe that?"

The man looked up at her, at her glowing eyes and the spirits that she knew were visible swirling around her. He looked at the Cree people watching him with dignity and restraint despite what he'd done. He looked at the blankets they'd given him, the mercy they'd shown.

"No," he whispered. "I was wrong. You are people. You have honor and laws and... and power I don't understand. I was wrong, and I'm sorry."

Maligowen watched him through spiritual sight, seeing the truth of his words, the genuine shift in his understanding. It wasn't complete—years of teaching couldn't be undone in one night—but it was real. The shame he felt was real. The beginning of change was real.

"The third trial is passed," she said quietly. "Your offense is forgiven. But you will carry the memory of this night. You will remember that the 'empty' land is full of peoples with their own wisdom, their own spirits, their own dignity. And you will carry that truth back to others of your kind."

The man nodded, tears streaming down his face—whether from relief, shame, or cold, Maligowen couldn't tell. Duncan stepped forward and helped him to his feet, his expression unreadable.

"You have shown us something today, Spirit Walker," Duncan said. "Your justice is different from ours, but it is justice nonetheless. Perhaps..." He paused, seeming to choose his words carefully. *"Perhaps there is more to learn here than I first thought."*

As the gathered peoples dispersed, tension easing if not disappearing entirely, Maligowen felt the weight of exhaustion crash over her. She had slipped in and out of the spirit realm dozens of times over the past day and night, had carried the burden of translation and judgment, had held the fragile peace together through sheer force of will and ancestral guidance.

Nokomis caught her as she swayed, helped her to a quiet place to rest.

"You did well, little one," her grandmother whispered. "You turned what could have been the spark to ignite war into a lesson both peoples needed to learn. The ancestors are proud."

But as Maligowen closed her eyes, drifting toward the sleep her body desperately needed, she knew the true test was still to come. The trials had proven something important—that justice could exist between their peoples, that understanding was possible. But Duncan's earlier words haunted her: more ships, more men, more weapons coming with every season.

The three trials had bought them time and proven a principle. But time was running out, and principles might not be enough to stop what was coming.

She slept, and in her dreams, the ancestors showed her more visions of possible futures, some bright with hope, others dark with inevitable loss. And in all of them, she walked alone between worlds, carrying burdens that would have crushed someone twice her age, fighting to save a people whose way of life was already beginning to fade like morning mist.



Chapter 8:

The Medicine Path

Maligowen woke three days later to find everything changed. The strangers had not left as expected but had instead set up a more permanent camp at the edge of Cree territory. Duncan claimed they needed time to rest and resupply before returning south, but Maligowen could sense the deeper truth—they were studying the Cree, learning their patterns, assessing their resources and vulnerabilities. The uneasy peace held, but it was stretched thin as spider silk.

More troubling was what had begun to happen within the village itself. It started small—Mikisow, a young hunter, developed a fever the morning after the trials. By midday, his wife Makwa-ikwe was burning with illness too. By evening, six more people showed the same symptoms: sweating, shaking, a cough that sounded like breaking branches.

"This is no ordinary sickness," Nokomis said grimly as she examined the afflicted. "I have seen something like it before, many years ago, when traders came from the east. It moves fast and kills faster. We call it the strangers' disease."

Maligowen felt ice form in her stomach. *"The strangers brought this?"*

"They carry illnesses we have no protection against," her grandmother explained, crushing herbs with practiced efficiency. "Just as we might carry sicknesses that would harm them. But we have no defenses, no medicine that has proven effective. When this disease last came, it killed a third of the people before moving on."

By nightfall, twelve people were sick. By the next morning, twenty. Panic began to ripple through the village as people remembered stories of the great dying that had swept through tribes to the south and east, wiping out entire villages in a matter of weeks.

"We should leave," Pakwatum argued at an emergency council. "Abandon this place before we all become infected. Scatter into small groups in the forest where the sickness cannot spread."

"And go where?" Mistahi-maskwa demanded. "Winter approaches. If we scatter now, many will die from cold and hunger. And if some of us are already sick but not yet showing symptoms, we'll only carry the disease to others."

"Then what do we do?" another elder asked. "Watch our people die one by one?"

All eyes turned to Maligowen. She felt the weight of their expectation like a physical burden. They had seen her translate languages through spirit guidance, had watched her create trials that brought justice. Now they looked to her for something even more impossible—healing a disease no one understood.

"I don't know if I can help," she admitted, her voice small despite the spirit power she carried. "I am Spirit Walker, not medicine keeper. That is Nokomis's gift."

"But you can speak to the ancestors," her father said quietly. "Surely some of them knew medicines we have forgotten. Surely they can guide us."

Maligowen looked at Nokomis, seeking permission or perhaps rescue. But her grandmother only nodded.

"The ancestors may know what I do not, child. And your gift allows you to see things I cannot—the spiritual causes of illness, the threads that connect body to spirit. Together, we may find what neither could find alone."

That night, Maligowen sat in the sacred grove while Nokomis kept watch. She had burned the herbs her grandmother gave her to help her travel deeply into the spirit realm, and now she let herself fall fully across the threshold, her body becoming an empty vessel while her spirit soared free.

The spirit world blazed with urgency. The ancestors crowded around her, more agitated than she had ever seen them. But among them, she sensed others—spirits of the sick, partially separated from their bodies, wandering confused between worlds. They were still tethered by thin silver threads, but those threads were fraying, weakening with each passing hour.

"Help us understand," Maligowen called into the spirit realm. *"What is this sickness? How do we fight it?"*

A figure materialized before her—an old woman she had never seen, wrapped in ancient furs and carrying a medicine bundle that glowed with power. *"I am Amisk-iskwew,"* the spirit said. *"Beaver Woman, medicine keeper of the people four generations before your grandmother. I faced this sickness when it first came to our lands."*

"Then you know how to cure it?" Hope surged in Maligowen's chest.

"Not cure. Ease. Help the body fight while the spirit stays anchored." Amisk-iskwew gestured, and images flowed into Maligowen's mind—plants she had never seen, growing in places she would need to find. *"White pine bark, boiled until the water turns red. Willow root for the fever. Wild ginger to settle the stomach. And most*

important—sweetgrass and cedar smoke, burned constantly around the sick to keep their spirits from wandering too far from their bodies."

"Will this save them?" Maligowen asked.

"Some. Not all. This disease is powerful, brought from across the great water where our medicines have never been needed before. But what I show you will help more survive than would otherwise live."

The spirit's form began to fade. *"Remember, Spirit Walker—healing is not just herbs and smoke. It is keeping the spirit connected to the body, giving people reasons to fight, to stay, to endure. Your gift can do this. You can see when spirits waver, can call them back, can remind them why they must remain."*

Maligowen absorbed the knowledge, feeling it settle into her mind like stones into a riverbed. Then she let herself flow back across the threshold, gasping as she reunited with her body.

"I know what we need," she told Nokomis, describing the plants and preparations the ancestor had shown her.

Her grandmother's eyes widened. *"That is old knowledge, very old. I learned pieces of it, but the full preparation... yes, this might work. But some of these plants—white pine bark in particular—we will need much of it. And it grows only in certain places."*

"Then we gather it," Maligowen said, standing despite her exhaustion. *"We gather it now, before more people sicken."*

They roused Makwa and Wapan, explained what was needed. Her brothers didn't question, simply grabbed their gathering bags and followed Maligowen into the pre-dawn forest. She moved as if pulled by invisible threads, the ancestors guiding her steps toward the plants they needed.

They found the white pine grove an hour's walk north, ancient trees whose bark held the medicine power Amisk-iskwew had shown

her. Makwa scaled the trees with practiced ease, carefully harvesting bark without killing the trees, while Wapan and Maligowen gathered the willow roots and wild ginger from the forest floor.

As they worked, Wapan asked quietly, *"Will this truly save them?"*

"Some of them," Maligowen said, not wanting to lie but unable to offer false hope. *"Not all. The disease is too strong. But more will live than would have without it."*

"And the strangers?" Makwa called down from his tree. *"They brought this sickness. Shouldn't they be made to leave?"*

Maligowen had been wrestling with this question herself. *"If we drive them away now, they will only return with more men, more weapons, and vengeance in their hearts. And they didn't bring the sickness intentionally—they carry it without knowing, without suffering from it themselves. It's not evil, just... different. Like how we might carry something that would harm them without meaning to."*

They returned to the village with full bags as the sun cleared the horizon. Nokomis immediately set to work, showing Maligowen how to prepare the medicines—how long to boil the pine bark, how to grind the willow root, how to mix the ginger with hot water to make it drinkable.

Then came the harder part. Maligowen moved between the sick lodges, tending to each afflicted person with medicine and with spirit work. She would give them the remedies Nokomis prepared, then slip partially into the spirit realm to see how their spirits fared.

Some were strong, their spirits bright and firmly tethered. These she simply encouraged, her presence and prayers helping them feel supported, giving them strength to fight. But others—too many

others, had spirits that flickered and wavered, already half-departed toward the land of the dead.

For these, Maligowen did something she had never attempted before. She reached across the threshold and grasped their spirit-forms gently, speaking to them directly in the language beyond language.

"Stay," she would say. *"Your children need you."* Or *"Stay, your work here is not finished."* Or *"Stay, because your people need every soul to face what comes."*

With young Mikisow, she found his spirit nearly gone, the thread connecting him to his body gossamer-thin. She grasped his spirit-hand and showed him his wife, showed him the child his wife carried that even she didn't yet know about, showed him the future that would exist if only he stayed and fought.

His spirit wavered, caught between the peace of the land of the dead and the struggle of life. For a long moment, Maligowen thought she would lose him. But then, slowly, his spirit began to strengthen, the thread thickening, color returning to his astral form.

In the physical world, Mikisow's breathing steadied, his fever broke, and his eyes fluttered open.

"The Spirit Walker saved him," someone whispered, and the words spread through the village like wildfire.

But Maligowen knew better. She hadn't saved him—she had simply given him a reason to save himself, had shown him what he would be fighting for. The medicine had helped his body fight. Her spirit work had helped his spirit stay. But the choice to live had been his own.

For three days and nights, Maligowen barely slept. She moved between the sick lodges, administering medicine and performing spirit work, calling wavering souls back to their bodies, giving people

reasons to fight for life. Nokomis worked beside her, teaching her which herbs to use when, how to read the signs of improving or declining health, the practical medicine that complemented spiritual healing.

Of the twenty-four who fell ill, nineteen survived. Five crossed over to the land of the dead—including old Napew, who had feared Maligowen at first but whose spirit she had held gently as he made his final journey, easing his passage with prayers and gratitude for his long life.

The victory was bittersweet. Lives saved, but lives lost too. And Maligowen knew that without the ancestor's guidance, without the medicine path she had walked, far more would have died.

Duncan came to observe on the third day, watching as Maligowen tended to the sick. She was aware of his presence but too focused on her work to pay him much attention. Only when she emerged from a lodge, exhausted and swaying, did he approach her.

"What did you give them?" he asked. "What medicine?"

"Why do you want to know?" she replied warily.

"Because five of my men have fallen sick with the same illness. We have no medicine for it. No understanding of it." He looked at her with something that might have been respect or might have been fear—she was too tired to tell the difference. "I would not see my men die if there is something that can be done."

Maligowen studied him through eyes that saw both physical and spiritual. His request seemed genuine, not a trick. And the ancestors whispered that this too was a test, a moment where she could choose between revenge and mercy.

"The illness comes from your people," she said bluntly. "It spreads from you to us because we have no defense against diseases from across the great water. But I will not let your men die for

carrying what they cannot help carrying." She gestured for him to follow. *"Come. I will show you what we do, and you will help me treat your own men."*

Duncan's eyes widened. *"You would help us? After we brought this plague to your people?"*

"I am medicine keeper in training," Maligowen said, echoing words Nokomis had spoken to her. *"I do not choose who lives or dies based on where they were born or what color their skin is. I choose based on whether I can help them—and whether they will let me."*

She led Duncan to Nokomis, and together they taught him how to prepare the pine bark tea, the willow root medicine, the ginger mixture. He watched with intense focus, asking questions, taking mental notes. Then she led him to where his sick men lay in their own camp, and she tended to them as she had tended to her own people.

The strangers' sickness was the same but different—their bodies fought it differently, and she had to adjust the medicines, trusting her developing instincts and the ancestors' quiet guidance. Of Duncan's five sick men, four recovered. The fifth—an older man whose spirit had been ready to depart long before the illness struck—crossed over peacefully, with Maligowen holding his hand and speaking prayers in his own language through the ancestors' translation.

Duncan watched this last act—a Cree child praying in English over a dying stranger—with an expression of profound conflict on his face.

"You are unlike anyone I have ever known," he said quietly after the man had passed. *"My people would not have done this. Would not have helped after we brought sickness to your village."*

"Then your people have much to learn about healing," Maligowen replied, though her voice was gentle, not condemning. *"Healing*

means treating the sickness wherever it appears, not asking whose fault it is first."

As word spread of what Maligowen had done—saving Cree and strangers alike, showing mercy even to those whose presence had brought the disease—something shifted in the village. The people who had feared her began to see her differently. Not as something unnatural to be wary of, but as something precious to be protected. She was their Spirit Walker, their bridge to the ancestors, and now their healer as well.

Even Pakwatum, who had been among the most skeptical, approached her after the crisis had passed. *"I was wrong about you,"* she said simply. *"I thought the spirits had cursed you, had made you strange. But I see now they blessed you, gave you gifts our people desperately need. Forgive my fear."*

"There is nothing to forgive," Maligowen replied. *"Fear of the unknown is natural. But I am glad you see me clearly now."*

That night, as Maligowen finally allowed herself to rest, truly rest, for the first time in days, Nokomis sat beside her and stroked her hair the way she had when Maligowen was small.

"You have walked the medicine path now," her grandmother said softly. *"You have learned that healing is more than herbs and prayers. It is seeing the whole person—body and spirit. It is choosing mercy over judgment. It is fighting for life even when death seems inevitable."* She paused. *"I could not have taught you this. You had to walk the path yourself. And you walked it with wisdom beyond your years."*

"I'm so tired, Grandmother," Maligowen whispered. *"Every time I use my gifts, it takes more from me. How do I keep doing this? How do I keep walking between worlds without losing myself completely?"*

"You learn to carry the burden without being crushed by it. You learn when to open the door and when to close it. You learn to accept that you cannot save everyone, cannot fix everything, and that this is not failure but simply the limit of being human—even a human touched by spirits." Nokomis kissed her forehead. *"You learn, my child. As all medicine keepers before you have learned. One difficult step at a time."*

Maligowen closed her eyes, letting exhaustion finally claim her. In her dreams, the ancestors came not with visions or warnings but with gratitude, with love, with pride in what she had accomplished. And among them, she saw the five who had crossed over during the illness, including old Napew, now at peace and free from pain, his spirit nodding to her with approval.

The medicine path had been walked. The sickness had been faced. And both Cree and strangers had been healed, not just in body but in understanding.

It was not enough to stop what was coming—Maligowen knew that. But it was enough for now. Enough to prove that even across the divide of culture and language and history, healing was possible.

If only both peoples would choose it.



Chapter 9:

The Vision Quest

Winter's first snow fell three weeks after the sickness passed, covering the land in white silence. The strangers had departed finally, returning to their fort in the south, but Duncan's parting words haunted Maligowen like the cry of distant wolves: *"More will come in spring. Many more. What you have built here—this fragile peace—will be tested beyond anything you can imagine. Prepare your people, Spirit Walker. The world is changing, and no amount of medicine or spirit-talk will stop it."*

The village had survived the epidemic, but barely. They faced winter weakened, with less food stored than was needed, with spirits dampened by loss and fear of what spring would bring. Mistahimaskwa called council after council, trying to forge plans for the future, but every discussion ended in argument. Some wanted to flee deeper into the wilderness. Others wanted to prepare for war. A few—very few—spoke of trying to establish formal trade relations with the strangers, of learning their ways while maintaining their own.

Maligowen attended these councils, translated when the ancestors offered wisdom, but increasingly she felt a restlessness growing inside her. She had walked between worlds, had healed the

sick, had brought justice through trials, but she still didn't understand the full scope of what was coming or what her true purpose was meant to be.

"You need a vision quest," Nokomis said one morning, finding Maligowen sitting alone by the frozen lake, staring at nothing. "A proper one, not the spontaneous transformation you underwent before. You need to go to the spirits deliberately, ask them to show you the path forward, to reveal your full purpose."

"I've already seen visions," Maligowen protested, though her heart quickened at her grandmother's words. "The night I became Spirit Walker, I saw—"

"You saw what you needed to see then. But you have grown since that night. You have healed, guided, walked between worlds more times than I can count. You are ready now for deeper truths, harder visions." Nokomis touched Maligowen's cheek gently. "The ancestors are calling you, child. Can you not feel it?"

Maligowen could feel it—had been feeling it for weeks. A pull toward the wilderness, toward solitude, toward some great truth that hovered just beyond her perception. She had been ignoring it, telling herself she was needed in the village, that she couldn't abandon her people when they needed her most.

"The village—" she began.

"Will survive three days without you," Nokomis interrupted firmly. "Your father and I will manage. You cannot guide others if you don't know where you're going yourself. You cannot show your people the future if you haven't seen it clearly."

So it was decided. Maligowen would undergo a formal vision quest, the traditional ceremony reserved for young men seeking their adult names and purposes. That she was female and eleven seasons

old made it unusual, but no one questioned it now. She was Spirit Walker. The normal rules had ceased to apply to her long ago.

Her father helped her prepare. *"Three days and three nights,"* he said, his voice heavy with concern and pride mingled together. *"No food, only water. You will go to the high place, the cliff overlooking the valley where our people have sought visions since before memory. You will build a sacred circle, burn offerings, and open yourself completely to whatever the spirits choose to show you."*

"I'm afraid," Maligowen admitted, surprising herself with the honesty.

Mistahi-maskwa pulled her close. *"Good. Fear means you understand the seriousness of what you attempt. Fear will keep you cautious, keep you grounded even as your spirit soars."* He held her at arm's length, looking into her eyes. *"But remember, daughter—no matter what you see, no matter how terrible or wonderful, you must return. Your people need you. Your family needs you. Promise me you'll come back."*

"I promise," Maligowen said, and meant it with every fiber of her being.

She left the village at dawn, carrying only a water skin, a flint for fire-making, and a bundle of sacred herbs. Makwa and Wapan walked with her to the base of the sacred cliff, neither speaking, their presence saying everything words couldn't.

At the cliff base, Wapan embraced her fiercely. *"Come back to us, little sister. The world is darker when you're not in it."*

Makwa's embrace was just as fierce but briefer, his warrior's discipline barely containing his emotion. *"Be strong. Be wise. Be safe."*

Then she was alone, climbing the narrow path up the cliff face, her breath misting in the cold air. The climb took two hours, her

muscles burning by the time she reached the summit. The high place was a flat expanse of stone, swept clean by wind, with a view that stretched to the horizon in all directions. She could see the frozen lake, the village huddled along its shore, the vast forest stretching away to the south where the strangers had their fort.

Following Nokomis's instructions, Maligowen used stones to create a sacred circle, marking the four directions with offerings—tobacco for the east, sage for the south, cedar for the west, sweetgrass for the north. In the center, she built a small fire, though the wood she had carried would only last one night. After that, she would face the cold with nothing but her own spirit to keep her warm.

As the sun set on the first day, painting the sky in brilliant oranges and purples, Maligowen sat in her circle and began to pray. Not in words but in feelings, in openness, in a deliberate surrender to whatever wisdom the spirits wished to impart. She burned the sacred herbs, letting the smoke carry her intentions skyward, and began to sing the old songs Nokomis had taught her—songs of calling, of invitation, of humble request.

The first night was the hardest. The cold bit deep, and hunger gnawed at her belly. Her body wanted to curl up, to conserve warmth, to sleep and forget the discomfort. But she forced herself to remain alert, to keep singing, to keep the fire burning. In the darkness beyond her small circle of light, she sensed presences gathering—spirits drawn by her call, ancestors coming to witness, perhaps entities that were neither friendly nor hostile but simply curious about this young human who dared to seek their attention.

Dawn came slowly, and with it, exhaustion that went bone-deep. Maligowen's voice was hoarse from singing, her body stiff from cold and sitting. But she didn't break the circle, didn't eat, didn't do anything except drink water and continue her vigil.

The second day passed in a blur. Without food, her body began to shift into a strange state—lighter somehow, less substantial. Colors seemed brighter, sounds sharper. The boundary between the physical and spiritual worlds grew thin, and she found herself slipping between them without conscious effort.

By the second night, the visions began.

They came not as the clear, structured experiences of her first transformation but as a flood of images and feelings, past and future tumbling together in chaotic profusion. She saw her people as they had been generations ago, living in harmony with the land, their numbers vast, their territories stretching to horizons she couldn't name. She saw the arrival of the first strangers, pale-skinned and strange, and the initial encounters—some peaceful, many not.

She saw diseases sweeping through tribe after tribe, killing more people than any war ever could. She saw the strangers spreading across the land like water breaking through a dam, inevitable and overwhelming. She saw treaties made and broken, promises given and betrayed. She saw her people pushed farther and farther from their ancestral lands, squeezed into smaller and smaller spaces.

But she also saw survival. She saw adaptation. She saw Cree people learning the strangers' languages, their technologies, their ways—not abandoning their own culture but adding new tools to their survival. She saw children who carried both heritages, bridges between worlds. She saw communities that bent but didn't break, that transformed but didn't disappear.

And through it all, she saw Spirit Walkers—not many, but a few in each generation, carrying the old wisdom forward, keeping the connection to the ancestors alive even as the physical world changed beyond recognition.

"This is your purpose," a voice said, and Maligowen realized she was no longer alone in her circle. The spirit from her first

transformation stood beside her, but now she could see its face clearly—or rather, its many faces, shifting and changing, male and female and neither, young and old, showing her that it represented not one ancestor but the collective wisdom of all who had come before.

"To be a bridge?" Maligowen asked, her voice barely more than a whisper. *"To help my people survive by changing?"*

"To be a keeper of truth," the spirit corrected. *"To remember what must be remembered while releasing what must be released. The world you were born into is ending, Spirit Walker. This is not your fault, not your doing. It would happen whether you existed or not. But because you do exist, because you have been given these gifts, you can influence how it happens. You can help your people navigate the change with dignity, with wisdom, with their spirits intact even if their circumstances must transform."*

"But how?" The question tore from Maligowen's throat. *"How do I help them face losing everything?"*

"By showing them that everything is not lost. That language can survive even when territory is taken. That ceremonies can continue even when forced into hiding. That identity is not tied to a single place or way of life but to the connections between people, to the stories they tell, to the spirits they honor." The being gestured, and more visions flooded Maligowen's awareness.

She saw herself grown—not much older, perhaps sixteen or seventeen seasons—standing before a great gathering of tribes. She was speaking with authority, translating not just between Cree and strangers but between different tribal nations, helping forge alliances that would be crucial for survival. She saw herself negotiating treaties, using her gift of spirit-sight to detect lies and truth, protecting her people from the worst betrayals even if she couldn't prevent all injustice.

She saw herself teaching others—young people with the gift of spirit-walking, helping them develop their abilities, creating a new generation of bridges between worlds. She saw herself very old, surrounded by grandchildren and great-grandchildren who carried both Cree blood and stranger blood, who spoke multiple languages, who lived in the new world while honoring the old.

"This is one possible future," the spirit said. "If you choose it. If you accept the burden of being bridge, teacher, keeper of wisdom. It will not be easy. You will be criticized by your own people for being too accommodating to the strangers. You will be viewed with suspicion by the strangers for being too 'savage,' too connected to the old ways. You will walk alone between worlds, never fully belonging to either."

"And if I refuse?" Maligowen asked, though she already knew the answer.

"Then you will watch your people be destroyed without guidance. You will see the worst possible future unfold—the future where trauma and loss crush the Cree spirit completely, where the language dies, the ceremonies are forgotten, the connection to the ancestors severed." The spirit's many faces looked at her with compassion. "You have already walked too far down this path to turn back, child. The question is not whether you will serve but how you will choose to serve. With hope or with despair. With wisdom or with bitterness. With faith that something can be preserved or with resignation that all is lost."

The vision shifted again, and Maligowen found herself standing on the sacred cliff but in a future time. The village was gone, replaced by structures of wood and brick in the strangers' style. People moved about dressed in cloth clothing, speaking in a mixture of Cree and the strangers' tongue. But in the center of this changed place stood a

lodge built in the traditional way, and from it came the sound of singing—the old songs, kept alive, remembered, honored.

"This is what you fight for," the spirit said. "Not to prevent change, for that is impossible. But to ensure that in the midst of change, the heart of your people survives. The language, the stories, the connection to the ancestors, the knowledge of who you are and where you come from. These things can survive anything if someone fights to preserve them."

"I'm just one person," Maligowen whispered. "One child. How can I possibly—"

"One person who walks between worlds. One person who carries the ancestors' wisdom. One person who has already proven she can build bridges where others see only chasms." The spirit began to fade. "You are enough, Maligowen. Not because you are powerful, but because you are willing. Not because you know all the answers, but because you are willing to seek them. Not because you can save everyone, but because you will try to save what can be saved."

The vision released her, and Maligowen found herself alone again in her circle as the third dawn broke across the sky. Her fire had long since died, and she was shaking with cold, weak with hunger, barely able to stand. But she felt lighter somehow, as if a great weight she hadn't known she carried had been lifted—or perhaps as if she had finally accepted its full measure and learned how to bear it.

She made her way down the cliff path slowly, carefully, her body weak but her spirit stronger than it had ever been. At the base, Makwa and Wapan waited—they had been there all three days, she realized, keeping vigil, ready to catch her if she fell.

"Did you find what you sought?" Wapan asked as they supported her between them, helping her walk back toward the village.

"I found my purpose," Maligowen said, her voice rough from three days of singing and praying. "I found the path I must walk, even though it leads through darkness and loss toward an uncertain future."

"That sounds terrible," Makwa said, his attempt at lightness not quite hiding his concern.

"Yes," Maligowen agreed. "But it's also hopeful. Because I saw that there is a future, that our people can survive what's coming, that something can be preserved even as everything changes." She looked at her brothers, these men who had teased her and taught her and loved her all her life. "And I saw that I don't walk this path alone. That there will be others—some born, some not yet conceived—who will carry the burden forward when I can carry it no longer."

They brought her back to the village, where Nokomis waited with warm broth and furs and the gentle hands of a healer. As Maligowen drifted toward much-needed sleep, wrapped in warmth and safety, she felt the ancestors' approval like a benediction.

The vision quest was complete. She had seen the truth of what was coming—the pain and loss, but also the survival, the adaptation, the continuity of spirit even when everything else changed.

She was Spirit Walker, bridge between worlds, keeper of wisdom. And now she knew exactly what that meant, what it would cost, and why it was worth paying any price to fulfill her purpose.

The world was changing. But the Cree would endure.

And she would spend her life making sure of it.



Chapter 10: The Challenge

Maligowen returned from her vision quest changed in ways both visible and invisible. She carried herself differently—not with the tentative movements of a child playing at being an adult, but with the settled presence of someone who had seen the full scope of her path and accepted it. The marks on her hands that had been faint now glowed more brightly, and when she spoke in council, her voice carried an authority that made even the eldest warriors lean forward to listen.

But not everyone was pleased with her growing influence.

The challenge came on the first full moon after her return. The village had gathered for the monthly council, where decisions were made about spring preparations, about how to respond when the strangers returned, about whether to send emissaries to other tribes to forge alliances. Maligowen had just finished sharing what her vision quest had revealed—the need to learn the strangers' ways while preserving their own, the importance of building bridges with

neighboring tribes, the truth that resistance through violence alone would only lead to destruction.

The silence that followed her words was heavy, uncomfortable. Then Kitchi-makwa—Great Bear, named for his size and ferocity—rose to his feet. He was Makwa's closest friend, a warrior of twenty-two seasons known for his skill in battle and his traditional views. His face was set in hard lines as he addressed not Maligowen but her father.

"Mistahi-maskwa, I have held my tongue for many moons now, out of respect for you and for the old ways. But I can remain silent no longer." His voice carried across the gathered people. *"Your daughter speaks of surrender disguised as wisdom. She tells us to learn the strangers' ways, to bend, to change who we are. She claims the spirits guide her, but how do we know it is our spirits and not the strangers' demons that whisper in her ear?"*

A ripple of shock passed through the crowd. To question a Spirit Walker's connection to the ancestors was to question the foundation of their spiritual beliefs. But Kitchi-makwa was not finished.

"She is a child. Eleven seasons old. Yet she translates in council, influences decisions of war and peace, tells warriors twice her age how to face our enemies." He turned now to face Maligowen directly. *"I do not doubt you have gifts, Spirit Walker. But gifts do not equal wisdom. And your counsel leads us toward a path of cowardice, of abandoning who we are to appease those who would take everything from us."*

Maligowen felt the weight of every eye upon her. She could see division in the crowd—some nodding agreement with Kitchi-makwa's words, others looking uncomfortable but not speaking in her defense. Even Makwa seemed torn, his loyalty to his friend warring with his faith in his sister.

"What would you have us do instead?" Maligowen asked quietly, keeping her voice steady despite the anger rising in her chest.

"Fight. Drive the strangers away. Show them that this land is not theirs for the taking. And if we cannot defeat them, then retreat deeper into the wilderness where they cannot follow, preserve our ways unchanged rather than corrupt them with their influence." Kitchi-makwa's hand moved to his war club. *"Our ancestors were warriors. They would not counsel surrender."*

"You speak for the ancestors now?" The words came out sharper than Maligowen intended. *"You, who have never walked between worlds? Who have never heard their voices or seen their faces?"*

"I speak as a warrior of the Cree people, which is more than you can claim." Kitchi-makwa's voice rose. *"You are Spirit Walker, yes. But you are not chief. You are not war leader. You are not even a hunter or warrior in your own right. You are a child who sees visions and translates words. Why should we trust our future to someone who has never even blooded a weapon in defense of the people?"*

The challenge hung in the air like the moment before lightning strikes. Maligowen felt the ancestors pressing at her awareness, offering guidance, but she pushed them back. This moment required her own voice, her own strength.

"You are right," she said, and surprise flickered across Kitchi-makwa's face. *"I am not a warrior. I have never killed in battle, never led a war party, never proven myself in the ways you value. But I have walked between death and life, bringing spirits back to their bodies. I have stood between violence and peace, turning what might have been massacre into meeting. I have translated not just words but worlds, building bridges where others see only chasms."* She stood, her slight form dwarfed by the warrior's bulk but her presence filling the space. *"You question whether I should have voice in our future. I challenge you to prove you are better suited to guide us than I am."*

Murmurs rippled through the crowd. A direct challenge between Spirit Walker and warrior—this was unprecedented, unheard of. How could such different paths even be compared?

"Name your test," Kitchi-makwa said, his voice eager. Clearly he expected some contest of physical prowess where his superior size and strength would make the outcome certain.

But Maligowen had not spent months learning from the ancestors without absorbing their cunning. *"Three contests, as is our way. But not contests of strength against strength. That would be like asking a fish to climb a tree."* She glanced at her father, saw him watching her with intense focus, neither approving nor forbidding. This was her battle to fight. *"Instead, three contests that test what a true leader needs—wisdom, courage, and the ability to see what others cannot see."*

"Riddles and spirit-tricks," Kitchi-makwa scoffed. *"This proves nothing."*

"Then you fear to face me?" Maligowen asked softly, and several warriors chuckled. She had maneuvered him into a corner—to refuse now would look like cowardice, would undermine his entire challenge.

"I fear nothing," Kitchi-makwa growled. *"Name your contests."*

Maligowen closed her eyes briefly, reaching into the spirit realm for guidance. The ancestors showed her what was needed—tests that would reveal truth, that would demonstrate to her people what kind of leadership they truly needed.

"The first contest: wisdom. Tomorrow at dawn, we will each be given a problem faced by our people. We will have until sundown to propose a solution. The council will judge whose solution shows greater wisdom and understanding."

Kitchi-makwa nodded. *"Agreed. And the second?"*

"The second contest: courage. But not the courage of facing a known enemy with weapons in hand. The courage to face the unknown, to walk into darkness without knowing what waits there." She met his eyes. *"We will each enter the sacred grove alone at night. There, the spirits will test us, show us our deepest fears. We must face those fears without fleeing, without calling for help. We must emerge at dawn with our spirits intact."*

This made Kitchi-makwa hesitate. He was brave in battle, fearless against any physical foe. But the spirit world was different, unpredictable. Still, pride would not let him refuse. *"Agreed. And the third?"*

"The third contest: sight. We will each be presented with the same situation—perhaps a stranger, perhaps a troubled member of our tribe, perhaps something else. We must see truly, beneath the surface, to the heart of what is real. We must demonstrate that we can perceive not just what is visible but what is hidden." Maligowen paused. *"This contest will be judged not by the council but by the person or situation itself. Truth will reveal truth."*

"I accept your challenge," Kitchi-makwa said, though unease flickered in his eyes. *"When do we begin?"*

"At dawn tomorrow," Mistahi-maskwa interjected, his voice carrying the authority of chief. *"And I will set the problem for the first contest. Is this acceptable to both of you?"*

Both Maligowen and Kitchi-makwa nodded.

"Then this council is ended. Rest well. Tomorrow we discover what kind of leadership our people truly need."

That night, Maligowen could not sleep. She sat with Nokomis in the old woman's lodge, preparing herbs by firelight, seeking comfort in the familiar work.

"You have taken a great risk," Nokomis said quietly. "If you lose, your authority will be shattered. The people will not trust your counsel, will not follow your guidance when the strangers return in spring."

"And if I do nothing, allow Kitchi-makwa to undermine me, the result will be the same," Maligowen replied. "Better to face the challenge now, on terms I can influence, than to have my authority slowly eroded until I am powerless to help when the crisis comes."

"You are learning statecraft along with spirit-craft," her grandmother observed with a slight smile. "The ancestors teach well."

"The ancestors show me possible paths. But I must choose which to walk, must take responsibility for my choices." Maligowen set down the pestle she'd been using. "What if I'm wrong, Grandmother? What if Kitchi-makwa is right, and fighting is the answer? What if my visions mislead me?"

"Then you will have failed doing what you believed was right, which is all any leader can do." Nokomis reached across and touched Maligowen's cheek. "But I do not think you are wrong. I have lived long enough to know that wisdom comes in many forms, and that the strongest warriors are not always the best leaders. You will show them this truth tomorrow."

Dawn came too quickly. The entire village gathered in the council circle as Mistahi-maskwa presented the problem for the first contest.

"A hunting party has returned with troubling news," he announced. "To the west, two days' journey, they encountered a small band of Anishinaabe people—women, children, and a few elderly men. Their village was attacked by another tribe, burned to nothing. They are starving, freezing, desperate. They ask for shelter, for food, for protection." He looked at Maligowen and Kitchi-makwa. "But our own supplies are limited after the sickness. We barely have

enough to see our own people through winter. What do you counsel? You have until sundown to present your solution."

Maligowen's mind raced. This was not a hypothetical problem—she could see from her father's expression that this was real, that refugees truly waited beyond their borders, that a decision must actually be made. The stakes were not just her authority but people's lives.

She spent the day in contemplation, part of it in the spirit realm seeking ancestral guidance, part of it walking the village, observing their stores, talking to the women about food preservation, to the hunters about game populations, to the medicine keepers about health concerns.

Kitchi-makwa spent his day conferring with other warriors, no doubt crafting a solution that would emphasize strength and self-preservation.

As the sun began its descent toward the horizon, they reconvened in the council circle. Kitchi-makwa spoke first, his voice confident.

"We cannot take in these refugees," he declared. "Our resources are limited. We have survived one crisis already. To strain our supplies further would risk all our people for the sake of strangers who may not even share our ways, our language, our loyalties. It is a harsh truth, but survival requires hard choices. We should send them hunters to help them find game, share what medicines we can spare, but they cannot shelter here."

It was logical, practical, and prioritized the tribe's survival. Murmurs of agreement rippled through some of the gathered people.

Then Maligowen stepped forward. Her voice was quieter but somehow carried further.

"Kitchi-makwa is right that resources are limited. He is right that survival requires difficult choices. But he is wrong about which choice will ensure our survival." She gestured to the village around them. *"We survived the strangers' sickness. We survived their arrival. We survived because we worked together, because we showed mercy even to those who brought disease to our doors. That unity, that capacity for compassion, that willingness to see beyond our own immediate needs—these are what will allow us to survive what is coming."*

She turned to face the full council. "The Anishinaabe refugees fled an attack. Who attacked them? Most likely another tribe, but perhaps the strangers, expanding their reach, burning villages that resist. If we turn these refugees away, we tell every tribe around us that the Cree care only for themselves. When the strangers come for us—and they will come—who will stand with us? Who will offer us shelter if we need to flee?"

"But our supplies—" someone called out.

"Will stretch if we are creative. I have observed our stores. We have more than we think if we prepare differently. Pemmican can be extended with gathered pine nuts. Fish can be caught through the ice. We can organize larger hunting parties that include the Anishinaabe men once they regain strength." Maligowen let herself slip slightly into the spirit realm, her voice taking on the harmonic quality that signaled ancestral guidance. *"The ancestors show me that our survival depends not on hoarding what we have but on building alliances, on proving ourselves worthy of aid when we need it. We take in these refugees, we forge a bond with the Anishinaabe people, and when crisis comes, we will have allies instead of just ourselves."*

She returned fully to the physical world. *"We show mercy not because it is easy but because it is the foundation of strength. We*

show compassion not despite the hard times but because of them. This is what the ancestors counsel. This is wisdom."

The council was silent for a long moment. Then Mistahi-maskwa spoke.

"The council will vote. Those who favor Kitchi-makwa's solution, stand."

About a third of the people rose—mostly younger warriors, some elders who valued tradition and caution.

"Those who favor Spirit Walker's solution, stand."

More people rose this time—slightly more than half, including Nokomis, both of Maligowen's brothers, and many of the women who had watched her heal the sick.

"The first contest is decided," Mistahi-maskwa announced. *"Spirit Walker's wisdom is judged greater. The Anishinaabe refugees will be welcomed, and we will face winter together."* He looked at both contestants. *"Tomorrow night comes the test of courage. Prepare yourselves."*

As the gathering dispersed, Kitchi-makwa approached

Maligowen, his expression unreadable. *"You won by appealing to fear—fear of the strangers, fear of standing alone. That is not wisdom but manipulation."*

"No," Maligowen said quietly. *"I won by showing them a future where mercy becomes strength, where isolated survival is impossible, where we must choose between building community or facing extinction alone. You see the world as it is. I see the world as it must become. That is the difference between us."*

Kitchi-makwa walked away without responding, but Maligowen could see doubt creeping into his certainty. One contest remained in her favor, but two more lay ahead. And the test of courage in the sacred grove would not be won by clever words or ancestral wisdom.

It would be won by facing whatever the spirits chose to show her—and she knew from experience that the spirits did not always show gentle truths.

She had won the first battle. But the war for her people's trust, for the right to guide them through the impossible times ahead, was far from over.



Chapter 11:

The Becoming

The second night fell cold and clear, stars scattered across the sky like ice crystals. Maligowen and Kitchi-makwa stood at the edge of the sacred grove, facing the darkness between the ancient cedars. The entire village had gathered to witness the test of courage, their breath misting in the frigid air, their faces lit by torches that cast dancing shadows.

Nokomis stepped forward, carrying two bundles wrapped in deerskin. She handed one to each contestant.

"Inside you will find sage, sweetgrass, and flint for fire-making. Nothing more." Her voice carried the weight of ceremony. "You will enter the grove alone. You will find your way to the stone circle at its heart. There, you will build a fire and open yourself to whatever the spirits choose to show you. You may not leave until dawn breaks. If you flee, if you call for help, you fail. Only by facing what comes with courage and truth can you emerge victorious."

Maligowen had been in the sacred grove many times, had spoken with spirits there, had received guidance and wisdom. But never like this—never as a test, never with the explicit intention of facing her deepest fears. She felt her heart hammering against her ribs.

Kitchi-makwa showed no visible fear, his warrior's training allowing him to mask any emotion. He nodded curtly to Nokomis, then stepped into the darkness between the trees without hesitation.

Maligowen waited a moment, steadying her breathing, then followed.

The grove at night was a different world. The familiar paths seemed to shift and twist, shadows moving with purpose rather than simply cast by moonlight. Maligowen could feel the spirits gathering, pressing close, curious about this test, perhaps eager to participate in it.

She found the stone circle—the same place where she had first drunk the spirit root, where she had begun her transformation. Her hands shook as she arranged kindling, struck flint to spark, coaxed the small flame into life. Then she burned the sage and sweetgrass, let the smoke carry her prayers upward, and opened herself to whatever would come.

At first, nothing happened. The fire crackled. The smoke rose. The stars wheeled overhead through the gap in the canopy. Maligowen waited, her body tense, her mind braced for visions of horror or loss.

Then the grove began to change.

The trees grew taller, their branches reaching down like grasping hands. The fire's light dimmed until she sat in near-darkness, the cold seeping into her bones. And from the shadows emerged figures—not spirits but something else, something darker.

They took the forms of her people, but twisted, corrupted. She saw her father with empty eyes, his spirit fled, leaving only a hollow shell. She saw Makwa covered in blood, not dead but broken, his warrior's pride shattered. She saw Wapan speaking words in the strangers' tongue, his own language forgotten, his identity erased.

"This is what will come," a voice whispered from the darkness—not the ancestors' warm guidance but something cold and gleeful. "This is the future you cannot prevent. Your people will be destroyed, body and spirit. Everything you love will be corrupted or erased. And it will be your fault for not fighting hard enough, for counseling weakness instead of strength."

Maligowen wanted to look away, to close her eyes, to flee the grove and the terrible visions. But she forced herself to remain still, to look directly at the images of horror the spirits—or perhaps her own fears—had conjured.

"No," she said, her voice shaking but clear. "This is one possible future. Not the only one. Not the inevitable one."

"You are a child playing at power," the voice hissed. "What makes you think you can change the fate of your people? What makes you think you're strong enough, wise enough, special enough to stand against the tide of history?"

And this, Maligowen realized, was the true test. Not to face external horrors but to confront her own self-doubt, the voice inside that whispered she was inadequate, that questioned every decision, that told her she was just a little girl pretending to be something more.

"I am not special," she said, tears streaming down her face. "I am not the strongest or the wisest or the most powerful. But I am willing. I am here. I am trying." She stood, her legs trembling. "And I have learned that courage is not the absence of fear. It is not being certain of success. Courage is showing up anyway, is doing what must be done even when you doubt yourself, even when failure seems likely."

The dark visions began to waver, losing substance.

"I cannot prevent all loss," Maligowen continued, her voice growing stronger. "I cannot save everyone. I cannot make the strangers disappear or turn back time to when we lived without threat. But I can help my people navigate what comes with dignity and wisdom. I can help preserve what can be preserved, adapt what must be adapted, remember what must never be forgotten." She spread her arms wide. *"And that is enough. Not perfect, not complete, but enough."*

The darkness shattered like glass, and Maligowen found herself back in the stone circle, the fire burning steadily, the stars bright overhead. The spirits had tested her and found her willing to face her deepest inadequacies without being destroyed by them.

She did not know how Kitchi-makwa fared in his own trial, could not sense his presence in the grove. Each person's test was their own, private and unique. She could only wait for dawn, keeping her fire burning, singing softly to the ancestors in gratitude for the trial and its passage.

When the first light broke across the horizon, painting the sky in shades of rose and gold, Maligowen emerged from the grove. Kitchi-makwa came from a different path moments later. He looked shaken, his warrior's composure cracked, his eyes holding shadows that hadn't been there before.

They stood before the assembled people, and Nokomis studied them both with her penetrating gaze.

"Did you flee?" she asked Kitchi-makwa.

"No," he said, his voice hoarse. *"I remained until dawn as required."*

"And you, Spirit Walker?"

"I remained," Maligowen confirmed.

"Then both have passed the test of courage," Nokomis announced. "Both faced the spirits' challenge and emerged with their spirits intact. The second contest is a draw."

Murmurs of surprise rippled through the crowd. Maligowen felt relief and disappointment mingled together. She had hoped to win decisively, but perhaps a draw was fitting—Kitchi-makwa had his own kind of courage, different from hers but no less real.

"Tonight comes the final test," Mistahi-maskwa said. "The test of sight. Of seeing what others cannot see, of perceiving truth beneath surface appearances." He gestured, and several people brought forward a figure bound and hooded. "This person was captured by our scouts at dawn, attempting to approach the village in secret. We do not know if they are friend or enemy, scout or refugee, danger or simply lost. Kitchi-makwa, Spirit Walker—you will each examine this person. You will tell us what you see, what you perceive, what truth lies beneath the surface. We will then remove the hood and discover which of you saw most truly."

Kitchi-makwa stepped forward first. He circled the bound figure, studying their build, their clothing, their posture. *"A man,"* he said confidently. *"Young, strong, trained as a warrior—see how he stands even while bound, balanced and ready. His clothing shows wear from travel, but the stitching is foreign, not Cree or Anishinaabe. Most likely a scout sent by the strangers or another hostile tribe. He approaches in secret, which suggests hostile intent. I counsel we interrogate him, learn what he knows, then drive him away as a warning to others."*

It was a reasonable assessment based on observable facts. The crowd nodded—this made sense.

Then Maligowen stepped forward. She let herself slip partially into the spirit realm, seeing not just with physical eyes but with the

sight the ancestors had given her. And what she saw made her breath catch.

"May I touch them?" she asked her father.

He nodded permission.

Maligowen approached the bound figure and placed her hands gently on either side of the hooded head. She closed her eyes, reaching deeper into spirit-sight, seeing beyond flesh to the essence beneath.

"This is no man," she said quietly. "This is a woman dressed in man's clothing for safety while traveling alone. She is young, perhaps sixteen seasons. She is not a scout or warrior but a survivor."

Maligowen's voice took on the harmonic quality of ancestral guidance. *"She fled her village three weeks ago when the strangers came. They killed her father, took her mother and sisters—she does not know where. She ran, disguised herself, and has been searching for safe refuge ever since."*

She opened her eyes, still seeing into the spirit realm. *"Her spirit is fractured by trauma but not broken. She carries grief like a physical weight, but also determination. She heard stories of the Cree village that took in Anishinaabe refugees, that showed mercy to the strangers' sick, that had a Spirit Walker who could see truth. She came seeking sanctuary, came in secret not from hostile intent but from fear that she would be turned away if she approached openly."*

Maligowen turned to face the crowd. *"She is not danger. She is hope. Hope that mercy exists, that there are still places in this changing world where kindness can be found."*

"That's impossible to know just by touching someone," Kitchimakwa protested. *"She's guessing, making up stories—"*

"Remove the hood," Mistahi-maskwa commanded.

When the hood came off, a young woman's face was revealed—exhausted, terrified, tear-stained. Her hair had been roughly shorn short in the manner of some tribes' mourning rituals. Her clothing was indeed men's garments, too large for her frame. And in her eyes was exactly the mixture of grief and desperate hope that Maligowen had described.

The woman looked at Maligowen and began to speak in a language that mixed several tribal dialects. Maligowen listened, then translated through the ancestors' guidance.

"She says her name is Niimoshe—Little Sister. She says she has traveled far seeking the Spirit Walker who healed both her own people and the strangers. She asks for sanctuary, for a chance to live, to perhaps one day find her family." Maligowen's voice softened. "She says if we must turn her away, she understands. But she asks that we give her food and send her on her way with our blessing, so at least she will die knowing there was one place in the world where kindness still existed."

The silence that followed was profound. Kitchi-makwa stood frozen, his certainty shattered. He had seen a threat. Maligowen had seen a person.

"The third contest is decided," Mistahi-maskwa said, his voice heavy with emotion. "Spirit Walker has demonstrated the sight we need—the ability to see not just surfaces but souls, not just present facts but deeper truths." He looked at Kitchi-makwa. "You are a fine warrior, Kitchi-makwa. Your courage and strength honor our people. But Spirit Walker has proven that wisdom, compassion, and the ability to truly see are what we need to navigate the times ahead."

Kitchi-makwa stood silent for a long moment. Then, slowly, he approached Maligowen. She braced herself, uncertain what he would do.

He knelt before her.

"I was wrong," he said, his voice rough with emotion. "I saw you as a child playing at power. But you are Spirit Walker in truth, chosen by the ancestors for purpose beyond my understanding." He looked up at her. "I still believe we must learn to fight, must maintain our strength as warriors. But I see now that fighting is not the only strength we need. Will you teach me to see as you see? Will you help me understand what my warrior's eyes miss?"

Maligowen felt tears prick her eyes. This was more than victory—this was transformation. Not her transformation but Kitchi-makwa's, and through him, perhaps the transformation of others who had doubted.

"I will teach you," she said, helping him stand. "And you will teach me. Teach me what warriors know, how to be strong in ways I am not. We do not need to choose between your strength and mine. We need both."

The crowd erupted in affirmation—not quite cheers but a deep sound of approval, of rightness recognized. And in that moment, Maligowen felt something shift fundamentally. She was no longer a child who had been given strange gifts. She was no longer proving herself or asking for acceptance.

She was Spirit Walker. Leader. Guide. Voice of the ancestors.

She was, at last, fully herself.

The becoming was complete.

That night, the village held a ceremony of recognition. Niimoshe was welcomed as one of their own, given food and clothing and a place in one of the lodges. The Anishinaabe refugees who had arrived days earlier were formally adopted into the tribe, their children already playing with Cree children, their women working alongside Cree women, the boundaries between peoples beginning to blur.

Maligowen stood before the central fire as Nokomis painted her face with sacred symbols—marks that identified her as Spirit Walker, Medicine Keeper in training, Voice of the Ancestors. Her father placed his hands on her shoulders, and when he spoke, his voice carried both pride and sorrow.

"My daughter was named Maligowen—Ghost Traveler—for the way she moved quietly through the world. But that child is gone, transformed as the spirits foretold. Today, before all our people, I recognize âcahk-mînowêsiw—Spirit Walker—not as my daughter learning her way but as a leader of our people in her own right."

He removed a necklace from around his own neck—a bear claw on a leather thong, the symbol of his chieftainship—and placed it around Maligowen's neck.

"You do not replace me as chief," he clarified, seeing alarm on some faces. "You are something different, something we have needed without knowing it. You are the one who walks between worlds, who sees paths others cannot see, who speaks for the ancestors and guides us through the impossible. You are co-leader, partner in the burden of caring for our people."

Maligowen felt the weight of the bear claw against her chest, felt the weight of responsibility settle onto her shoulders like a mantle. She was twelve seasons old. She should be learning to make moccasins, to gather berries, to giggle with other girls over which young hunters were handsome.

Instead, she was Spirit Walker, bearing the future of her people in her still-small hands.

But as she looked out over the gathered faces—her father's pride, her brothers' love, Nokomis's satisfaction, Kitchi-makwa's newfound respect, Niimoshe's desperate hope, the refugees' gratitude, even the lingering doubt of some who still weren't certain—she felt the ancestors' presence like warm sunlight.

She was not alone. She had never been alone. The spirits walked with her, guided her, held her up when the burden grew too heavy.

She was Spirit Walker. Bridge between worlds. Keeper of truth. Voice of the ancestors.

And she was ready for whatever would come when spring arrived and the strangers returned.

The becoming was complete. The real work was just beginning.



Chapter 12:

The Great Decision

Spring came early that year, the ice breaking on the lake with cracks like thunder, the snow melting in rushing streams that turned the forest paths to mud. With the thaw came the strangers, just as Duncan had promised. But not twelve men this time, or even thirty. More than a hundred arrived—traders, soldiers, surveyors with their strange tools for measuring and marking the land, and even a few families with women and children, wooden carts piled high with possessions.

They established a permanent camp at the river bend, building structures of hewn logs that would stand through seasons, not the temporary cloth shelters of before. Smoke rose from their fires day and night. The sound of axes biting into trees echoed through the forest. And with them came more—more metal tools, more thunder-weapons, more of everything that made them powerful and dangerous and impossible to ignore.

Duncan came to the village three days after their arrival, bringing gifts—iron knives, wool blankets, glass beads that caught the light like frozen dewdrops. He requested a formal meeting with the tribal leaders, and Mistahi-maskwa could not refuse without breaking the fragile peace they had built.

The council gathered in the largest lodge, expanded over winter to accommodate the growing population of Cree, Anishinaabe refugees, and now the new arrival Niimoshe who had proven herself valuable as a scout and hunter. Maligowen sat at her father's right hand, wearing the bear claw necklace, her face painted with the symbols of Spirit Walker. Nokomis sat at his left. The council elders formed a circle, with Kitchi-makwa and other warriors standing ready near the entrance.

Duncan entered with two of his men, all three removing their hats in a gesture that Maligowen understood signified respect in their culture. He looked older than when she'd last seen him, the winter having added lines to his weathered face.

"Chief Mistahi-maskwa, Spirit Walker âcahk-mînowêsiw," he said, inclining his head to each. "Thank you for receiving us. I come with a proposal from my superiors, from the company that claims these territories in the name of the crown."

Maligowen translated his words, feeling the ancestors press close, urgent and troubled.

"We wish to establish formal trade relations," Duncan continued. "We will pay well for furs—beaver, fox, marten. We offer iron tools, weapons, cloth, and other goods your people need. In exchange, we ask only for furs and..." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "And your cooperation in not interfering with our settlement activities."

"You mean," Mistahi-maskwa said slowly, "you want us to allow you to spread across our land, to cut our forests, to mark and measure and claim what has been ours since the first sunrise."

"I mean," Duncan replied, "that settlement is happening whether you cooperate or not. More ships arrive every season. More people come seeking new lives. You cannot stop this tide. But you can choose whether to benefit from it or be swept away by it."

The bluntness sent a ripple of anger through the council. Several warriors' hands moved to weapons. But Maligowen raised her hand, and the room quieted—a small gesture that showed how much had changed over winter.

"And if we refuse your offer?" she asked. "If we say your company has no right to claim what is not theirs, that we will not trade away our land for iron knives?"

Duncan's expression grew grave. *"Then others will be sent who are less interested in cooperation. Soldiers, not traders. Men who see problems to be eliminated rather than potential partners to be cultivated."* He leaned forward. *"I do not say this as threat but as warning, Spirit Walker. I have seen what happens when indigenous peoples resist European expansion. I have seen villages burned, populations decimated, entire tribes scattered to the winds. I do not wish this for your people."*

"How generous," Kitchi-makwa said from his position by the entrance, his voice dripping with sarcasm. *"You threaten us with destruction and call it kindness."*

"I threaten you with reality," Duncan replied. *"And offer you a path through it that allows you to maintain some autonomy, some dignity, some chance at survival."*

Maligowen felt the weight of the moment pressing down on her. This was what her vision quest had shown her—the great decision that would shape not just the next season but generations to come. Accept trade relations and effectively acknowledge the strangers' right to the land, or refuse and face the consequences of resistance.

"We need time to discuss this among ourselves," Mistahi-maskwa said. *"Return in three days. We will have our answer then."*

After Duncan left, the council erupted into heated debate that lasted through the night and into the next day. The arguments were fierce, passionate, pulling in every direction.

"We should refuse," Kitchi-makwa argued, though his tone was more measured than it would have been before his trials with Maligowen. *"To accept their trade is to accept their claim. We begin by trading furs and end by trading our very identity."*

"We should accept," countered Minikwan, an elder who had lost his entire family to the winter sickness. *"We are weakened, outnumbered. The iron tools they offer would help us survive, would give us advantages in hunting and building. Why suffer from pride when practical benefit is offered?"*

"Because accepting their gifts makes us dependent," Pakwatum said. *"What happens when they decide the price of iron tools is not just furs but land? Not just trade but submission?"*

Round and round the arguments went, each with merit, each revealing deep fears and hopes. Maligowen listened to all of it, feeling the ancestors' agitation growing, sensing they wanted her to speak but waiting for the right moment.

Finally, as dawn broke on the second day of debate, her father turned to her. *"You have been silent, daughter. What do the ancestors counsel?"*

Maligowen stood, feeling every eye upon her. She let herself slip partially into the spirit realm, allowing the ancestors' wisdom to flow through her, but keeping her own voice, her own judgment.

"The ancestors show me many paths," she began. *"If we refuse trade and resist openly, we face destruction. Our warriors are brave, but the strangers' weapons are more powerful, their numbers will only grow. This path leads to the vision I saw in my first transformation—our village burning, our people scattered."*

She paused, letting that reality settle.

"If we accept trade without conditions, without strategy, we begin a slow surrender. We become dependent on their goods, forget our own skills, lose our autonomy piece by piece until we are Cree only in name, living at the strangers' pleasure."

"Then what is the third path?" Nokomis asked. "For there is always a third path."

"We accept trade," Maligowen said, and gasps of shock and betrayal filled the lodge. She raised her hand for silence. "But we do so strategically, carefully, maintaining our own ways while learning theirs. We trade furs, yes—but only surplus furs, never depleting the animal populations as the strangers would have us do. We accept iron tools—but we also maintain our knowledge of stone and bone tools, keep those skills alive for when the strangers' goods are no longer available or affordable."

She began to pace, her young voice carrying authority that came from something beyond her years.

"We learn their language—I will teach it, as the ancestors teach me—but we also ensure every child learns Cree first, that our language remains strong and vital. We allow them to build their settlement—because we cannot prevent it—but we negotiate clear boundaries, sacred places that must remain untouched, hunting grounds that remain ours."

"You speak of compromise," Kitchi-makwa said, not accusingly but thoughtfully. "Of bending without breaking."

"I speak of survival," Maligowen replied. "The strangers will not leave. More will come, and more after that. This is the reality the ancestors show me across every possible future. But how we respond to that reality—whether we maintain our identity and autonomy or lose it completely, that is still our choice."

She turned to face the full council.

"We make them see us as valuable partners, not obstacles. We become necessary to their success—guides through territory they don't understand, sources of knowledge about the land and its resources, bridges to other tribes. We make ourselves too useful to destroy, too knowledgeable to ignore, too strong in our own ways to be dismissed as savages."

"And when they betray us?" Pakwatum asked quietly. "For the ancestors must show you that they will eventually betray us."

"Yes," Maligowen admitted, the word heavy with sorrow. "There will be betrayals. Treaties will be broken. Promises will prove hollow. But if we are strong, if we maintain our identity and skills and connections, we survive the betrayals. Wounded, yes. Changed, inevitably. But not destroyed. Not erased. Not forgotten."

She moved to the center of the circle, addressing each person individually with her gaze.

"The ancestors show me seven generations forward. I see our descendants living in a world very different from ours—a world shaped by the strangers' ways, speaking their languages alongside ours, practicing their religions alongside our ceremonies. But I also see them remembering. Remembering the stories, honoring the ancestors, practicing the old ways in new contexts. I see them knowing who they are, where they come from, what their people survived."

Tears streamed down her face as she spoke.

"That is what we fight for now. Not to prevent change—that is impossible. But to ensure that through all the changes, through all the losses and adaptations and compromises, the heart of the Cree people survives. Seven generations from now, I want children who look at the stars and know the stories our ancestors told about them."

I want them to speak our language, even if they also speak others. I want them to remember that we were here, that we survived, that we chose adaptation not from weakness but from wisdom."

The silence that followed was profound. Maligowen could see the struggle on every face—the desire to refuse, to fight, to maintain everything unchanged warring with the recognition that she spoke truth, that survival required painful choices.

Finally, old Napew's sister, Iskwew—the woman whose dead son Maligowen had seen in spirit form—spoke. *"Spirit Walker sees truly. I do not want this future she describes. I want the world of my youth, when we lived without fear of strangers, when the land was ours without question. But that world is already gone. The question is not whether it ends but whether anything remains after it ends."*

One by one, council members nodded. Not with enthusiasm but with acceptance, with recognition that sometimes wisdom meant choosing between bad options and worse ones.

Mistahi-maskwa looked at his daughter with an expression that mixed pride and grief in equal measure. *"Then we are decided. We accept trade relations with the strangers. But we negotiate terms, establish boundaries, make clear that cooperation is not submission."* He stood, his chief's presence filling the lodge. *"And we prepare. We learn everything we can about them—their ways, their weaknesses, their divisions. We forge alliances with other tribes, create networks of support. We adapt and strengthen and endure."*

When Duncan returned three days later, Mistahi-maskwa delivered their answer with Maligowen translating. They would trade. They would cooperate. But they had conditions—sacred sites must remain untouched, hunting grounds clearly delineated, the tribe's autonomy in internal matters recognized. They would trade surplus furs, not deplete the animal populations. They would learn from the strangers but maintain their own ways.

Duncan listened carefully, negotiated some points, accepted others. In the end, they reached an agreement that both sides could accept, though neither was entirely satisfied.

As Duncan prepared to leave, he paused before Maligowen. *"You are remarkable, Spirit Walker. In my land, women are not permitted to hold such authority. Children are not taken seriously in councils. Yet you speak and strong men listen. You guide and your people follow."* He shook his head in wonder. *"I do not understand your power, but I respect it. And I wonder..."* He hesitated. *"I wonder if you see more truly than those of us who claim civilization. Perhaps the real savages are those who think they can claim land simply by drawing lines on maps."*

"Perhaps," Maligowen said quietly. *"But you will draw your lines anyway. And we will find ways to live within them, around them, despite them."*

"Yes," Duncan agreed. *"I suppose we will."*

After he left, Maligowen stood at the edge of the village, looking out over the lake where ice still floated in patches, watching the smoke rise from the strangers' settlement visible in the distance. She felt Kitchi-makwa's presence beside her before he spoke.

"Did we make the right choice?" he asked.

"I don't know," Maligowen admitted. *"The ancestors show me that this path offers the best chance of survival, but chance is not certainty. We may have just agreed to our own slow destruction, trading our identity for a few more years of peace."*

"Or we may have found the way through impossible circumstances, preserved what matters most while releasing what cannot be held." Kitchi-makwa was quiet for a moment. *"Either way, we made the choice together. Your wisdom and my strength. Your visions and my practicality. That has to count for something."*

"It counts for everything," Maligowen said. "We cannot face what comes alone. We need each other—all of us, with all our different gifts." She looked up at the warrior who had challenged her and was now her strongest ally. "The great decision is made. Now we learn to live with its consequences."

"Together," Kitchi-makwa said.

"Together," Maligowen agreed.

The spring wind carried the scent of melting snow and new growth, of endings and beginnings mixed together. The world was changing. The Cree were changing with it. And somewhere in the space between what was lost and what might be gained, Spirit Walker would guide her people through the impossible, one difficult decision at a time.

The great decision was made. The hard work of living with it had just begun.



Chapter 13: Walking Between Worlds

Summer came with abundance that felt like a blessing after the hard winter. The fish returned to spawn in the shallows, the berries ripened in thick clusters, and the garden plots—expanded with iron tools traded from the strangers—yielded corn and squash in quantities that promised a well-stocked winter. Trade between the Cree and the settlement proceeded cautiously but steadily, with Maligowen serving as the primary translator and mediator for increasingly complex negotiations.

But the abundance came with a price. The strangers' axes bit into the forest daily, clearing land for more buildings, more fields, more of everything that marked their permanent presence. The sound of their church bell, a strange metal voice that sang out each morning and evening...carried across the water, a constant reminder of how thoroughly the world was changing.

For Maligowen, the summer became a lesson in the exhausting work of walking between worlds—not just spiritually, as she had learned to do, but culturally, politically, humanly.

She spent mornings in the village, teaching young ones the Cree language with deliberate intensity, ensuring they learned the old stories, the names of plants and animals, the prayers to the ancestors. She worked with Nokomis, learning more advanced healing

techniques, how to set broken bones, how to deliver babies, how to ease the passage of the dying. She practiced with Kitchi-makwa and other warriors, learning to shoot a bow with accuracy, to track silently, to read signs in the forest that spoke of danger or opportunity.

But she also spent afternoons at the settlement, learning the strangers' language more completely, studying their ways of writing...those strange marks on pale bark that could capture words and hold them across time and distance. A priest named Father Benedict had taken particular interest in her, seeing her as a potential bridge to "saving the souls" of her people. Maligowen tolerated his religious instruction because it gave her insight into how the strangers thought, what they believed, what motivated them.

"You have a sharp mind," Father Benedict told her one afternoon, watching her copy letters onto a slate board. *"In England, such intelligence in a child would be recognized, cultivated. Here..."* He shook his head. *"Here, you are wasted among those who cannot read, cannot write, cannot comprehend the glory of civilization."*

Maligowen looked up from her letters, seeing him through both physical and spiritual sight. His intentions were not cruel—he genuinely believed he was helping her, saving her from what he saw as a primitive existence. This made him more dangerous than those who hated openly. Hatred could be fought. Pity that wore the mask of kindness was harder to combat.

"My people have wisdom your books cannot capture," she said carefully, speaking in his language to show she had learned it well. *"We have stories that stretch back farther than your writing. We have knowledge of this land that your maps cannot measure. Perhaps what you call 'wasted' is actually 'different,' and what you call 'savage' is simply 'unfamiliar.'"*

Father Benedict frowned, as he always did when she challenged his assumptions. *"Nevertheless, child, I hope one day you will accept*

Christ into your heart and bring your people to the true faith. It would be a great service to them and to God."

"And I hope," Maligowen replied, "that one day you will understand that the Great Spirit and your Christ may be different names for the same divine presence, and that neither your people nor mine have the only path to truth."

She left before he could respond, feeling the familiar exhaustion that came from constantly translating not just words but entire worldviews between peoples who could barely imagine each other's perspectives.

The exhaustion grew worse as summer progressed. Walking between worlds meant belonging fully to neither. In the village, some people whispered that she spent too much time with the strangers, that she was becoming more like them than like her own people. At the settlement, many viewed her with suspicion or condescension, seeing her as a curiosity, a child playing at being important, or worse, a savage who had learned some tricks but remained fundamentally inferior.

Only in the spirit realm did she find respite. There, the ancestors welcomed her without judgment, without demands that she be one thing or another. They understood that bridges must touch both shores, that those who walk between worlds can never rest entirely in either.

But even the spirit realm was changing. One night, during her evening meditation, Maligowen crossed the threshold and found the usually peaceful spirit forest in turmoil. The ancestors were gathered in greater numbers than she had ever seen, and their agitation filled the air like static before a lightning storm.

"What troubles you?" she asked, her spirit-form materializing among them.

The collective presence that had guided her throughout her transformation appeared, but its many faces were troubled. *"The balance is shifting too quickly,"* it said. *"The strangers bring not just their bodies but their spirits, their beliefs, their dead. The spirit realm is becoming crowded, chaotic, as two different understandings of the afterlife collide in the same space."*

Maligowen looked around and for the first time noticed what the ancestor meant. Among the familiar spirits of her people—translucent, connected to the land and the tribal memory—were other presences. Confused spirits of Europeans who had died far from home, trying to find their way to whatever heaven or hell their faith had taught them existed. They moved through the spirit forest like lost children, sometimes intersecting with Cree spirits, creating moments of confusion and distress for both.

"What can I do?" Maligowen asked, feeling overwhelmed by the scope of the problem.

"You must become a bridge here too," the ancestor-collective replied. *"You must help both kinds of spirits understand each other, find peace with each other. The living world forces your peoples to share space—now the spirit world must learn to do the same."*

And so Maligowen added another burden to her already heavy load. Each night, she walked the spirit realm, approaching confused European ghosts, speaking to them in their own language through the ancestors' guidance, helping them understand that they were not in their Christian heaven or hell but in a spirit realm that existed alongside the physical world, that their God and the Great Spirit might be speaking to them through different voices but with the same essential love.

It was delicate, exhausting work. Some European spirits recoiled from her, seeing her as a demon sent to trick them. Some Cree spirits resented her helping the invaders even in death. But slowly, carefully,

she began to create understanding, to show both kinds of spirits that peace was possible even after death, that the spirit realm was vast enough to hold different truths simultaneously.

The work took its toll. Maligowen began to lose weight despite the summer's abundance. Dark circles appeared under her eyes. She sometimes forgot to eat, forgot to sleep, caught between the demands of the physical world and the increasingly urgent needs of the spirit realm.

One morning, she simply collapsed during a teaching session with the village children. She fell without warning, her small body crumpling like a puppet with cut strings. When she opened her eyes, she was in Nokomis's lodge, her grandmother's worried face hovering above her.

"You are burning yourself out," Nokomis said bluntly, once Maligowen's eyes focused. *"You cannot be everything to everyone—teacher, translator, healer, spirit guide, diplomat. Even Spirit Walker has limits, child. Even you can break."*

"But if I stop—" Maligowen began.

"Then others will step forward. Your brothers can teach hunting skills. Other women can teach language and stories. Duncan has learned enough Cree to handle simple trade negotiations. And the spirits?" Nokomis smiled sadly. *"The spirits existed long before you and will exist long after. They do not need you to solve every problem. They need you to survive, to continue being a bridge, but not to destroy yourself in the process."*

"I don't know how to stop," Maligowen admitted, tears leaking from her eyes. *"Every time I rest, I see something that needs doing, someone who needs help, some crisis that only I can address. How do I walk between worlds without being torn apart by them?"*

"You learn to close doors," Nokomis said, pressing a bundle of herbs into Maligowen's hand—the same mixture she had given her seasons ago. "You learn that you can visit the spirit realm without living there. You learn that helping your people survive does not mean solving every problem personally. You learn, my child, to be human even while carrying gifts that are more than human."

Over the following weeks, Nokomis enforced a strict regime. Maligowen was forbidden from crossing into the spirit realm more than once per day. She was required to eat three full meals and sleep a full night. She was allowed to translate only for the most important meetings, with others handling routine trade negotiations. She was permitted to teach, but only for a few hours each day, with other knowledge keepers sharing the burden.

At first, Maligowen chafed against these restrictions, feeling guilty for resting while work remained undone. But gradually, she began to notice something surprising—the world did not fall apart when she stepped back. Others rose to fill the spaces she left. Her brothers became better teachers. Duncan and several Cree traders developed their own pidgin language for basic communication. Young people with hints of spiritual sensitivity began having their own small visions, their own connections to the ancestors.

She was not, it turned out, the only bridge between worlds. She was simply the most visible, the most powerful, the one carrying the heaviest burden. But there were others—some in her own village, some in the settlement—who were building their own small bridges, creating their own connections, learning to walk carefully between different ways of being.

One evening, as Maligowen sat by the lake watching the sunset paint the sky in brilliant colors, Niimoshe joined her. The young woman had thrived over the summer, her trauma slowly healing, her skills as a hunter making her valuable to the community.

"Spirit Walker," she said quietly, "I wanted to thank you. Not just for giving me sanctuary when I had nowhere else to go, but for showing me that surviving is not the same as living. That we can adapt without disappearing. That walking between worlds is possible."

"You've learned to walk between worlds?" Maligowen asked, curious.

Niimoshe nodded. "In my own way. I work sometimes at the settlement, trading meat for their goods, learning their words. But I also learned from you—I teach the children the old songs from my original tribe, mixing them with Cree songs, creating something new that honors both. And at night, I dream of my mother and sisters, and sometimes I think I hear them speaking to me, telling me to live, to remember, to carry forward what can be carried."

Maligowen felt tears prick her eyes. "You have your own connection to the spirit world."

"Small compared to yours," Niimoshe said. "Just whispers and dreams. But it is enough. It is mine." She looked at Maligowen seriously. "What I am trying to say is—you have taught others how to be bridges. You do not have to be the only one. We can help carry the weight."

That night, in her carefully limited spirit-walk, Maligowen shared this conversation with the ancestor-collective. "I think I am beginning to understand," she said. "My purpose is not to solve everything myself but to show others how to walk between worlds. To be the first bridge so others can learn to be bridges too."

"Now you are learning wisdom," the collective replied, its many faces showing approval. "A single bridge can be destroyed, can be overwhelmed by too much traffic. But many small bridges, many people learning to walk between worlds in their own ways—this creates a network that can survive anything. This is how cultures

survive contact, Spirit Walker. Not through one hero but through many ordinary people learning to carry pieces of the burden."

"So I teach," Maligowen said, understanding settling into her bones like truth. "I demonstrate. I pioneer the path so others can follow more easily."

"Exactly. You are not the destination. You are the beginning, the first step, the one who proves it is possible. Others will follow, each in their own way, each carrying their own piece of the bridge between worlds."

When Maligowen returned to her body that night, she felt lighter than she had in months. The burden was still heavy, but it was no longer crushing because she understood she was not meant to carry it alone forever. She was meant to carry it first, long enough to show others how it could be carried, and then to share the weight with all those who had learned from her example.

By summer's end, Maligowen had established a new rhythm. She taught regularly but briefly, showing others how to teach so knowledge could spread without relying solely on her. She translated for important negotiations but encouraged others to learn both languages, to become their own small bridges. She walked the spirit realm nightly but not constantly, understanding that even the spirits could wait for her scheduled visits.

Most importantly, she began to identify others with spiritual sensitivity...children who saw things others didn't, adults who had vivid dreams, people who felt the presence of ancestors hovering near. She worked with them individually, teaching them to open doors to the spirit world safely, to close those doors when needed, to walk between worlds without losing themselves to either side.

"You are creating the next generation of Spirit Walkers," Nokomis observed one evening, watching Maligowen work with a young boy who could sometimes see his dead grandmother.

"Not Spirit Walkers," Maligowen corrected gently. "Just people who can see a little more than most, who can walk a little farther between worlds than others. Not everyone needs to be able to do what I do. Many people need only to take a few steps across the threshold, to touch the spirit world lightly before returning to the physical. That is enough. That is valuable."

"You are wise beyond your years," her grandmother said. "Or perhaps you are wise precisely because of your years—every year you have lived has taught you what most learn only in old age, if they learn it at all."

As autumn approached and the leaves began to turn, Maligowen stood once more at the boundary between the village and the settlement, between the Cree way of life and the strangers' world. But now she stood there with confidence, with understanding that her role was not to choose between worlds but to exist in the space between them, creating room for others to join her there.

She was Spirit Walker. Bridge between worlds. Teacher of bridges. And she was learning...slowly, painfully, but surely—how to walk her path without being destroyed by it.

The balance was fragile. The future was uncertain. But there were others learning to walk between worlds now, others who could help carry the weight when it grew too heavy.

And that made all the difference.



Chapter 14: The Gathering Storm

The first frost came early that autumn, coating the world in silver and warning of a harsh winter ahead. But it was not the cold that made Maligowen's spirit uneasy as she stood watching the sunrise paint the frozen lake in shades of pink and gold. For weeks, she had felt something building—a pressure in the air, a tension in the spirit realm, whispers from ancestors that grew more urgent with each passing day.

Something was coming. Something that would test everything they had built.

The warning came from an unexpected source. Three canoes appeared on the lake one grey morning, paddled by Anishinaabe warriors from the north. They came under a white flag of truce, seeking immediate council with the Cree leadership. Their faces were grim, their manner urgent.

Mistahi-maskwa gathered the council quickly, with Maligowen at his side. The Anishinaabe spokesman, a scarred warrior named Makade, spoke with barely controlled fury.

"The strangers have built a new fort," he said, his words clipped and harsh. "Three days north of here, on land that has belonged to our people since the grandfathers' grandfathers walked the earth. They did not ask permission. They did not negotiate. They simply

came with their axes and their thunder-weapons and began cutting, building, claiming."

A cold dread settled in Maligowen's stomach. *"How many strangers?"*

"Fifty men, perhaps more. Soldiers, not traders. Led by a man with scars on his face and ice in his heart. They fly a different flag than the settlement you know—red and white instead of the colors Duncan's people carry. When our chiefs went to speak with them, to demand they leave our territory, they were driven away with threats and weapons." Makade leaned forward, his voice dropping to something dangerous. "Three of our young warriors, not understanding the distance of the strangers' weapons, tried to defend our land. All three were killed before they came close enough to fight."

The council chamber erupted in outrage and alarm. If the strangers were killing over territorial disputes, if they were spreading beyond the agreed boundaries, if different groups of strangers with different flags were arriving—everything could collapse into chaos and bloodshed.

"We have come," Makade continued, "because we hear the Cree have made arrangements with the pale-skins, have learned to speak their tongue, have even traded with them. We come asking for alliance, for guidance, for help in understanding these strangers who take without asking and kill without remorse."

Mistahi-maskwa looked to Maligowen. *"Can you reach Duncan? Ask what he knows of this new fort, these new strangers?"*

"I will go immediately," Maligowen said, already rising.

She took Kitchi-makwa and Wapan with her, the three of them making their way quickly to the settlement. They found Duncan in his

log house, bent over maps and papers, his expression troubled even before they arrived.

"You've heard," he said when he saw their faces. It wasn't a question.

"Tell me this is not your doing," Maligowen said, her voice tight. "Tell me you did not lie about boundaries and cooperation while your people built forts on land they promised to respect."

"It is not my doing," Duncan said, his voice heavy with frustration. "And they are not my people—not entirely. There are different companies, Spirit Walker. Different groups of Europeans claiming different parts of this land for different kings and purposes. The fort to the north was built by the French. My company is English. We are not united in our approach to the indigenous peoples."

"You are all strangers to us," Kitchi-makwa said sharply. "Your conflicts between yourselves mean nothing to the tribes you displace."

"I know," Duncan admitted. "But they mean everything to whether you can expect consistent treatment or must navigate multiple powers with different interests." He spread his hands helplessly. "I have tried to establish fair trade and peaceful coexistence. But I cannot control what the French do, cannot prevent other Europeans from arriving and pursuing their own strategies."

"The Anishinaabe warriors were killed," Maligowen said. "Three young men, dead because they tried to defend their own land."

Duncan's face went pale. "That is... unfortunate. The French commander is known for harsh responses to resistance. He believes force is the only language the 'savages' understand." He said the last word with distaste, acknowledging its ugliness. "If the Anishinaabe retaliate, if other tribes join them, this could escalate into full war."

"And if they do nothing?" Maligowen challenged. "If they simply accept the theft of their land and the murder of their young men?"

"Then they survive to see another day," Duncan said quietly. "I do not say this is just. I say this is reality. The French will not leave because they are asked. They will not apologize for the deaths. They will only leave if forced by superior power, and no combination of tribes in this region has that power."

The truth of his words sat like stones in Maligowen's stomach. She closed her eyes briefly, reaching into the spirit realm for guidance. The ancestors showed her branching paths—war leading to more death and eventual defeat, submission leading to more encroachment and eventual displacement, and a narrow third path that required perfect timing and tremendous courage.

"There may be another way," she said slowly, the vision still unfolding in her mind. "But it will require the Anishinaabe to trust us, to follow a plan that will seem like madness, like betrayal even. And it will require you, Duncan, to choose between your business interests and what is right."

Both men looked at her sharply. *"What do you propose?"* her father asked, having followed them to the settlement.

"A gathering," Maligowen said, the ancestors' wisdom flowing through her. "The largest gathering of tribes this region has seen in a generation. Anishinaabe, Cree, the refugees' original tribes, every band and village within a week's journey. We invite them all to our territory under promise of safe council and preparation for winter."

"Why?" Kitchi-makwa asked. "So we can argue amongst ourselves while the strangers continue to take our land?"

"No. So we can show them—all the strangers, French and English alike—that we are not scattered bands to be picked off one by one. That we are many, that we are unified, that we have numbers

and organization." Maligowen turned to Duncan. "Your people respect shows of force, yes? Demonstrations of power?"

"Yes," he admitted. "More than we respect appeals to justice or morality."

"Then we show force without violence. We gather hundreds, perhaps thousands of warriors in one place. We demonstrate that any aggression against one tribe will be met by response from all tribes. We create a confederation—not permanent perhaps, but solid enough to make the strangers think twice about casual murder and land theft."

"And me?" Duncan asked. "What do you need from me?"

"Carry word to the French fort. Tell them that the tribes are gathering not for war but for counsel. Invite their commander to send a representative to meet with our united council. Make it clear that continued violence will unite all tribes against all strangers—English settlements included." Maligowen held his gaze. "And make it clear to your own company that the Cree's cooperation, our trade, our knowledge of the territory—all of it depends on the French respecting tribal sovereignty. Make your people pressure the French to back down."

"You ask me to turn European against European," Duncan said.

"I ask you to use the divisions between strangers to protect the people who were here first," Maligowen corrected. "You told me yourself—the French and English are not allies. Use that. Make the French fort a problem for your company. Make peace between tribes and settlers more profitable than conflict."

Duncan was silent for a long moment, clearly wrestling with the implications. Finally, he nodded. "It might work. The company does not want full-scale tribal war—it would disrupt trade, make the territory too dangerous for families, hurt profits. If I can frame the

French aggression as a threat to English interests..." He looked at Maligowen with something like awe. "You think like a European diplomat, Spirit Walker. Using politics and self-interest to achieve your aims."

"I think like someone who wants her people to survive," Maligowen replied. *"Whatever that requires."*

The next weeks were a blur of frantic activity. Runners were sent to every tribe within reach, carrying Maligowen's invitation to the great gathering. Some came eagerly, seeing opportunity for alliance. Others came warily, suspicious of the Cree's relationship with the English settlement but too concerned about the French fort to refuse.

The Anishinaabe chief, a weathered man named Migizi—Eagle—came with fifty warriors, their faces still painted for mourning their dead. He met with Mistahi-maskwa and Maligowen in council, his skepticism clear.

"You ask us to gather and talk," he said, "while our young men lie dead and unavenged. You ask us to trust in politics and demonstrations while the pale-skins laugh at our boundaries and murder with impunity."

"I ask you to be strategic," Maligowen replied. *"Vengeance would feel good for a moment, but it would give the French excuse to bring more soldiers, to burn your villages, to justify the destruction they already desire. Show strength through unity instead. Show them that tribal peoples can act together, can present a unified front that makes casual aggression too costly to contemplate."*

"And if they attack anyway?" Migizi demanded. *"If they see our gathering as threat rather than deterrent?"*

"Then we fight," Kitchi-makwa said, speaking for the first time. The warrior had been silent through most of the planning, but now his voice carried weight. *"But we fight united, with strategy, with*

advantage of terrain and numbers. Not scattered raids that accomplish nothing but provide excuse for greater retaliation." He looked at Migizi warrior to warrior. "I wanted to fight when the strangers first came. Spirit Walker counseled patience, strategy, preparation. I thought her a coward. I was wrong. Her way has kept us alive, kept us strong. Give her strategy a chance before we embrace the war that will come anyway if we do not change the circumstances."

Migizi studied them both—the young Spirit Walker who spoke with ancestors' wisdom, the warrior who had learned to value strategy over simple courage. Finally, he nodded. *"We will come to your gathering. We will give your plan a chance. But if it fails, if the French continue to push, then we fight—all of us together, as you say."*

By the time the leaves had fallen completely, transforming the forest into a skeleton of itself, nearly eight hundred people had gathered in the expanded Cree territory. It was the largest assembly anyone could remember—Cree, Anishinaabe, bands of refugee peoples, even a few scouts from tribes farther west who had heard of the gathering and came to observe.

The visual impact was staggering. Hundreds of lodges spread along the lake shore. Hundreds of warriors, each representing not just individual strength but the combined military capacity of their people. Dozens of chiefs and elders, each bringing wisdom and perspective. And at the center of it all, Maligowen—young, small, but carrying authority that had been forged in spirit trials and practical tests of leadership.

Duncan arrived with representatives from the English company, and true to his word, he had brought word to the French fort, inviting them to send an envoy. The French commander, a scarred man named Beaumont, arrived with ten soldiers, clearly expecting either submission or conflict.

What he found instead was a demonstration of unity that made his expression shift from arrogance to calculation.

The great council was held in a massive clearing, with all the chiefs and elders forming a circle. Maligowen served as primary translator, with others she had taught assisting. The gathered tribes spoke with many voices but one message: the land belonged to the peoples who had walked it for generations uncounted. The strangers could trade, could build in agreed-upon areas, could live here if they respected the sovereignty and rights of the indigenous peoples.

But casual theft of land, murder of tribal peoples, disregard for boundaries—these would unite all tribes in resistance. Make the territory too dangerous, too costly, too difficult for settlement to proceed peacefully.

Beaumont listened with barely concealed contempt, but Maligowen could see calculation behind his eyes. He had come expecting to intimidate scattered bands. Instead, he faced a confederation that, while temporary, demonstrated organizational capacity and military potential his small fort could not match.

"Your demonstration is noted," he said through Maligowen's translation. *"But the king of France has claimed these territories. No amount of gathering changes that fact."*

"And we," Migizi replied, standing to address the French commander directly, *"have lived on this land since the spirits first gave it form. No marks on your king's papers change that fact."* He gestured to the assembled multitude. *"You see here only a fraction of the peoples who call this land home. Attack one, and you attack all. Is your fort worth the cost of constant warfare with peoples who know every tree, every trail, every hiding place?"*

For a long moment, no one moved. The tension stretched like a bowstring pulled to breaking. Maligowen held her breath, reaching

into the spirit realm to sense the currents of possibility flowing through this moment.

Finally, Beaumont spoke. *"I will carry word of this gathering to my superiors. I make no promises except this—if the tribes respect our fort and its boundaries, we will not pursue further expansion into Anishinaabe territories. For now."*

It was not peace. It was not justice. But it was a pause, a breathing space, a moment where force of unity had achieved what force of arms could not.

As Beaumont and his soldiers departed, Duncan approached Maligowen. *"You did it,"* he said quietly. *"You created something that might actually work—not perfectly, not permanently, but enough to slow the inevitable, to buy time for your peoples to adapt."*

"Time is all we can buy," Maligowen replied, exhaustion making her voice thin. *"Time to learn, to strengthen, to prepare for when the gathering dissolves and we must face the strangers' expansion again."*

"But you've shown them—shown all of us—that tribal peoples can organize, can act with sophistication and strategy." Duncan paused. *"You've made it harder for men like Beaumont to dismiss you as savages. That may be worth more than any single victory in battle."*

As the gathering began to dissolve over the following days, chiefs and elders departing to their own territories, Maligowen felt both triumph and foreboding. They had achieved something remarkable—a demonstration of unity that had genuinely changed the strangers' calculations, that had bought time and space for the tribes to breathe.

But the storm was only beginning. More strangers would come. More forts would be built. More conflicts would emerge. The gathering

had been impressive, but could it be maintained? Could temporary unity become lasting alliance?

Maligowen stood at the lake shore, watching the last canoes depart, and let herself slip briefly into the spirit realm. The ancestors gathered close, their presence warm with approval but tinged with sorrow.

"You have done well," the collective voice said. "But this is only the beginning of the storm, Spirit Walker. What comes next will test everything you are, everything you have built, everything your people can endure."

"I know," Maligowen whispered. "I see it coming, feel it building like thunder in the distance."

"And still you stand firm," the ancestor-voice replied. "That is courage. Not the absence of fear but the choice to face what comes despite knowing its weight."

As winter's first snow began to fall, covering the trampled ground where hundreds had gathered, Maligowen turned back toward the village. The storm was gathering. But they had bought time. They had shown strength. They had created possibility where before there had been only inevitable defeat.

It would have to be enough. Because ready or not, the true test was still to come.



Chapter 15: The Legacy

Winter settled over the land like a blanket, and in its quiet depths, Maligowen found moments to breathe, to rest, to simply be thirteen seasons old—though that child seemed impossibly distant from who she had become. The great gathering had dispersed, but its effects rippled outward like stones thrown into still water. Word spread through tribal networks of the confederation that had faced down the French, of the young Spirit Walker who had orchestrated unity from division, of the possibility that strategic resistance might succeed where violent resistance had failed.

But with spring would come new challenges. Duncan's reports suggested more ships were arriving from across the great water, carrying more settlers, more soldiers, more people who saw the vast land as empty space waiting to be filled. The pause they had won was temporary, fragile as ice forming on the lake's edge.

On a clear winter morning, Maligowen sat with Nokomis in the sacred grove, the snow around them pristine and undisturbed. Her grandmother had been teaching her the deepest medicine knowledge—not just healing herbs but the understanding of when to heal and when to let go, when to fight for life and when to ease passage into death.

"You are nearly ready," Nokomis said quietly, her breath misting in the cold air. "Nearly ready to carry the full weight of medicine keeper along with Spirit Walker. But there is one final teaching you must receive, one final truth you must accept."

"What truth?" Maligowen asked.

"That you cannot save everyone. Cannot preserve everything. That sometimes the greatest wisdom is knowing what to let go." Nokomis looked at her granddaughter with eyes that held both love and sorrow. *"My time grows short, child. I feel it in my bones, see it in my dreams. This winter or the next, I will cross over to join the ancestors."*

"No," Maligowen protested, though she had sensed this truth hovering at the edges of her awareness. "I can heal you, can speak to the spirits, can—"

"Can what? Stop the natural cycle of life?" Nokomis smiled gently. "I am old, Maligowen. I have lived a full life, seen seven decades of seasons turn. I am ready to rest, to join those who have gone before. The question is whether you are ready to let me go."

Tears froze on Maligowen's cheeks. *"How can I lead without you? How can I make decisions without your wisdom to guide me?"*

"The same way I led after my own teacher passed. The same way every medicine keeper has led since the beginning of time—with the knowledge we have given you, with the ancestors' guidance, and with trust in your own wisdom that has grown beyond anything I could teach." Nokomis took Maligowen's hands in hers. *"You do not need me anymore, child. You have not needed me for some time. But you needed to believe you needed me, and I was content to let you believe it while you grew into your full power."*

That night, as Maligowen walked the spirit realm in her meditation, she found the ancestors gathered in unusual numbers.

Among them stood Nokomis—not as she was in physical form, aged and worn, but as she had been in her prime, strong and radiant with power.

"Grandmother?" Maligowen asked, confused. "But you're still alive, still in the village—"

"My spirit walks ahead," Nokomis's ghost-form said. "Preparing the way, learning the paths I will soon walk permanently. This is how it works for medicine keepers, child. We begin to exist more in the spirit realm than the physical world as our time approaches. We become bridges ourselves, teaching you that death is not ending but transformation."

"I'm not ready," Maligowen whispered.

"You are more ready than you know. And you will not be alone. Look around you."

Maligowen did, and for the first time, she noticed others in the spirit realm who were not fully ancestors. Young people from the village, from refugee bands, even a few from the settlement—people she had been teaching to open doors to the spirit world, to walk carefully between realms. They were not as deep in the spirit realm as she was, could not see or hear as much, but they were there, learning, growing, building their own connections.

"You have created what I could never have created," Nokomis said with pride. "Not just one Spirit Walker to carry all the burden, but many small walkers, many people who can touch the spirit world and carry pieces of the wisdom forward. This is how knowledge survives, child. Not through single heroes but through networks of ordinary people doing extraordinary things in small ways."

The vision faded, and Maligowen returned to her body with tears streaming down her face and understanding settling into her bones. She had spent so long thinking her purpose was to save her people

from destruction, to prevent the losses that colonialism would bring. But the ancestors had shown her a different truth—her purpose was to help her people survive the destruction, to ensure that something essential carried forward even as everything else changed.

Spring came with both hope and sorrow. Nokomis passed quietly in her sleep on the first night after the ice broke on the lake, slipping away peacefully to join the ancestors she had served all her life. The village mourned, but Maligowen felt a strange peace beneath her grief. Her grandmother had not been taken—she had chosen her moment, had waited until Maligowen was strong enough to carry on alone, and then had simply let go.

The funeral ceremony was enormous, drawing people from all the tribes that had attended the great gathering. Nokomis had been beloved, respected, a living link to the old ways. As they honored her memory, as they spoke of her wisdom and healing, Maligowen realized her grandmother's greatest teaching was being demonstrated in death—that individual lives end, but the knowledge they carry, the people they teach, the changes they make ripple forward into countless futures.

In the weeks following Nokomis's death, Maligowen formally took on the full role of medicine keeper, though she had effectively been fulfilling it for months. She also took time to complete a task her grandmother had suggested before passing—she began teaching others to write using both Cree symbols she had developed and the strangers' letters. If knowledge was to survive, it needed to be recorded in forms that could last beyond memory.

She worked with the eldest council members to write down the sacred stories, the names of plants and their uses, the boundaries and hunting grounds of the tribe, the genealogies that connected people back through generations. She taught young people to read these writings, to add to them, to carry them forward.

"You are creating a new tradition," Kitchi-makwa observed one day, watching her teach a group of children to form letters. "We have always passed knowledge through stories, through oral teaching. Now you add writing to our tools."

"The strangers have shown us that those who control the written word control history," Maligowen replied. "When they write about us, they call us savages, say our land was empty, claim we had no laws or organization. If we write our own histories, record our own knowledge, then our voices cannot be erased. Our truths will exist even if everything else is taken from us."

It was not her only innovation. Throughout that spring and summer, Maligowen worked to formalize the network of alliances the gathering had created. She traveled with small groups to visit allied tribes, negotiating agreements, establishing protocols for mutual aid and defense, creating ties that could be activated if crisis demanded.

She also maintained careful relations with the settlement. Duncan's company had grown, but so had Cree fluency in the strangers' language, understanding of their customs, ability to navigate their systems. When disputes arose—and they did, constantly—Maligowen and others she had trained served as mediators, preventing small conflicts from escalating into violence that would give either side excuse for greater aggression.

It was exhausting work, endless work, the kind of work that never truly finished. But it was also effective. The predicted wave of violent expansion slowed in their region, replaced by uneasy coexistence that benefited both peoples even as tensions simmered constantly beneath the surface.

One evening, as summer turned toward autumn and Maligowen approached her fourteenth season, she sat with her father and brothers by the lake. The settlement was visible across the water, its buildings now permanent structures that would outlast any seasonal

camp. Smoke rose from dozens of chimneys. The sound of their church bell marked the evening hour.

"Do you ever wonder," Wapan asked quietly, "if we made the right choice? Accepting them, learning from them, changing ourselves to accommodate them?"

"Every day," Maligowen admitted. "Every day I wonder if there was another path, if we could have preserved more, changed less."

"But?" Makwa prompted, hearing the unspoken word.

"But we are alive," Maligowen said simply. "We speak our language, practice our ceremonies, know who we are and where we come from. Other tribes farther south, farther east—the stories say many were destroyed completely, their languages lost, their people scattered beyond recovery. We have bent, yes. We have changed, yes. But we have not broken."

"Not yet," Makwa said softly.

"Not yet," Maligowen agreed. "And maybe not ever, if we remain strong, remain adaptable, remain united. The strangers will always be more powerful in weapons and numbers. But we will always know this land better, understand its rhythms better, be able to survive in ways they cannot. That knowledge, that connection—it's worth more than all their iron tools."

Mistahi-maskwa, who had been silent through this exchange, finally spoke. *"You have done what I could not have done, daughter. When I was young, I thought strength meant resistance, meant never bending, never compromising. You have shown me that true strength is more complex—knowing when to stand firm and when to yield, when to fight and when to negotiate, when to preserve tradition unchanged and when to adapt it for survival."*

He removed the bear claw necklace from around his neck and held it out to her. *"I am still chief. But you are the one who guides us*

through the impossible. You are the one who walks between worlds and shows us the path. This belongs to you fully now, not as co-leader but as true chief when my time comes—which I hope will be many years hence, but no one knows the spirits' plans."

Maligowen took the necklace with trembling hands, feeling its familiar weight, understanding all it represented. *"I am still so young."*

"In years, yes. In experience, in wisdom, in burdens carried?" Her father smiled sadly. *"You are older than I was when I became chief. And you have gifts I never dreamed of having. You are ready, daughter. You have been ready for some time."*

That night, Maligowen walked the spirit realm one more time, seeking the ancestors' counsel. She found Nokomis waiting, radiant in her spirit form, surrounded by the countless medicine keepers and Spirit Walkers who had come before.

"You have done well, little one," Nokomis said. *"Better than I dared hope when you first drank the spirit root and crossed the threshold. You have created networks of knowledge, bridges between peoples, systems that can survive beyond any single person. You have planted seeds that will grow for generations."*

"But will it be enough?" Maligowen asked the question that haunted her. *"Will what I've built survive the storm that's coming?"*

"Some of it will survive," Nokomis replied. *"Some will be lost. But the seeds you've planted—the writing, the alliances, the people you've taught to walk between worlds, the stories you've preserved—these will endure. Not unchanged, never unchanged. But alive, growing, adapting."*

The ancestor-collective that had guided Maligowen since her first transformation materialized beside Nokomis. *"You have fulfilled your purpose, Spirit Walker. Not by preventing change—that was never*

possible. But by ensuring that through all the changes, all the losses, all the inevitable transformations, something essential survives. The heart of the people endures."

"Seven generations from now," Maligowen said, remembering the vision from her quest, "will they remember? Will they know who they are?"

"Some will," the collective replied. "Because you built networks instead of monuments, taught people instead of hoarding knowledge, adapted instead of rigidly preserving. Your way—the way of the bridge-builder, the way of strategic survival—will be passed down through stories, through practices, through the very bones of those who come after."

When Maligowen opened her eyes, dawn was breaking over the lake, painting the world in shades of rose and gold. She stood, feeling the bear claw necklace heavy against her chest, and looked out over the village—the traditional lodges and the new-style structures built with iron tools, the Cree people and the integrated refugees, the children who spoke multiple languages and practiced ceremonies that blended old and new.

It was not the world she had been born into. That world was already gone, transformed beyond recovery. But it was not the world of complete destruction either. It was something between—a world of adaptation and survival, of loss and preservation existing side by side.

She was Spirit Walker. Medicine keeper. Chief in all but formal title. Bridge between worlds. And she was not yet fourteen seasons old.

The work would never be finished. The challenges would never cease. More strangers would come, more conflicts would arise, more impossible choices would demand wisdom beyond her years.

But she was not alone. She had built networks of people who could help carry the burden. She had preserved knowledge in forms that could survive disaster. She had created alliances that could weather storms. And she had taught others to walk between worlds, to be their own small bridges, to carry forward what must never be forgotten.

Maligowen, called Ghost Traveler as a child, had become âcahk-mînowêsiw—Spirit Walker—and had transformed not just herself but the very possibility of her people's survival.

As the sun rose higher, warming the cool morning air, she turned back toward the village. There would be ceremonies to conduct, disputes to mediate, children to teach, alliances to maintain. The work of a lifetime, compressed into her still-young years.

But when the time came—when her own crossing approached, when her spirit prepared to join the ancestors—she would know that she had done what the spirits asked of her. She had walked between worlds and shown others the path. She had preserved what could be preserved and adapted what must be adapted. She had given her people a chance.

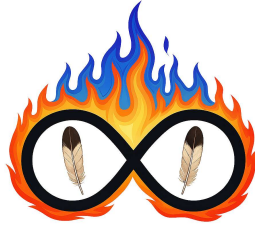
And sometimes, a chance was all anyone could hope for.

The legacy was built. The seeds were planted. The bridges stood firm.

Whatever storms came next, the people would endure.

Because Spirit Walker had shown them how.

THE END



Epilogue:

The Circle Never Ends

The wind carried no sound that morning—only memory. It whispered through the spruce and the old birch trees, where the moss had grown thick enough to hold the footprints of spirits. The sun climbed slowly, brushing the horizon with gold—the color of renewal, the shade of promise.

Maligowen stood at the edge of the lake where everything had begun.

The same water that had once mirrored a frightened child now reflected the calm face of someone who had seen both worlds and learned to walk between them.

The ripples at her feet carried stories—voices of ancestors, echoes of old prayers, the laughter of those who had once been and still were.

She knelt, pressing her palm against the water's cool surface. In that touch was gratitude—for the pain that had taught her compassion, for the silence that had shaped her strength, for the unseen hands that had guided her steps when she thought she walked alone.

The old teachings had said the world was a circle, and now she understood.

What you send out—love, anger, hope—returns in a form you might not recognize, but always with purpose.

What is taken is never lost; it simply changes shape.

The river that feeds the lake one day returns to the clouds, and the clouds to the river again.

Above her, a hawk circled.

In Cree belief, the hawk carries messages between worlds—a watcher, a reminder that vision must come with humility. Maligowen lifted her gaze, following the bird's slow spiral until it vanished into the sky's endless blue.

Her grandmother's voice rose softly in her mind:

"Kihci-Manitow gives us breath, but we decide how to use it. Walk gently, child, for even the earth remembers your steps."

For years, she had run from her own shadow—from grief, guilt, and the ghosts of mistakes that had shaped her youth. But the journey had never been about escape; it had always been about return.

Return to the self she had abandoned.

Return to the stories that still lived in her blood.

Return to the knowing that she was never separate from creation, only sleeping within it.

The drumbeat of her heart matched the rhythm of the waves. Each thump was a prayer—not for redemption, but for balance. She thought of those who would come after her—the children who would inherit this land, its languages, its songs. They would face their own storms, but perhaps they would also find their own still waters.

The people would remember, if not through words, then through actions—through the way they shared food, through the way they looked up when the wind changed direction, through the quiet gratitude before each meal, each sunrise.

Maligowen reached into her pouch and drew out a small braid of sweetgrass. She lit its end and let the smoke curl upward. It carried her prayer to *Kihci-Manitow*—for forgiveness, for strength, for the wisdom to listen more than to speak.

She offered tobacco to the water, to the trees, to the wind. Her whisper was soft, almost part of the breeze:

*"To those who walked before me—I thank you.
To those who walk beside me—I honor you.
To those who will walk after me—I leave the trail open."*

The land seemed to exhale in return.

In the distance, she could hear the faint rhythm of drums—perhaps from the village, perhaps from somewhere beyond.

She smiled, knowing it didn't matter.

Sound was only the body of something greater—the spirit beneath it was eternal.

As the smoke faded, she rose, the air cool against her skin.

Her journey had never been one of destination, but of transformation.

The spirit that once wandered restless had found its home not in a place, but in presence.

The people would tell her story differently in each generation.

Some would call her *the spirit walker*.

Others would say she was simply a woman who remembered what it meant to listen.

Both would be true.

The path before her shimmered with light—not from the sun, but from within.

She stepped forward, her feet pressing into the soft earth, leaving no mark behind.

In Cree, there is a word for this kind of peace:

miyo-pimâtisiwin — *the good life*, a state of balance between self, spirit, and the world.

Maligowen whispered it once, then again, feeling its truth settle deep inside her bones.

Somewhere far off, a loon cried out—a lonely, haunting song that sounded like both an ending and a beginning.
And so it was.

The circle was complete.
The walker had become the stillness.
The spirit had returned to the wind.

Curtis Brown – Author, Strategist, Creator

Curtis Brown is a versatile writer and strategist who has worked with everyone from Fortune 500 giants to small, family-run businesses. With a background in marketing, research, and content creation, Curtis is passionate about helping individuals and entrepreneurs create lasting change from the inside out.

As co-founder of [**Mandie's Safe Haven**](#), Curtis partners with his wife, Mandie Brown, to provide resources and tools for emotional healing, personal transformation, and sustainable business growth.

Curtis writes across genres—including business, self-help, fantasy, and personal development—with a focus on mindset, mastery, and purpose-driven action. His mission is to simplify powerful ideas and deliver them in a practical, inspiring way for readers who are ready to elevate their lives.

"Knowledge is not power... unless manifested."

~ Curtis Brown

Published Works by Curtis Brown:

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