

GIFT OF TWO SPIRITS

by

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Black death charges from the shadows, her roar a flash flood of hate. I am far from my tribe's hunting grounds, but I should have known of her presence: marks on trees, the scent of her scat. Surely I recognized those things. But I walked into her path anyway with bow over my shoulder and knife tucked in my belt.

Jaw clenched I turn to her, opening my arms to fate. The chant of my forefathers is knocked from my lungs by her force. Tangled, we hit the hard earth together. Three inch fangs tear my deer skin shirt like a dry leaf. There is no air to scream with her weight on me as she rips into my shoulder. Claws sharper than nightmares shred my thigh as I futilely try to dislodge the mass of her.

The pain reaches deep and unites with the acid anger inside of me. Venomous words committed in uncomprehending ignorance sear to the surface. Screaming and punching, the truth I've denied burns out of me. For one moment, I see my life clearly. Shuddering a sob, I know it has come too late.

Her blood soaked breath blasts over my face as the world turns as dark as her fur. The grizzly roars. Before the spirit world steals my sight, I hear Moon Feather's battle cry ringing like a star rising in the west.

Moon Feather makes no sound behind me, but I know my hunting brother is there. I can outrun him, but not outpace. The sweet scent of the forest fills my lungs. Ahead is a thicket of new growth: young trees and briars. I pull my bow off my shoulder seeing from the corner of my eye Moon Feather do the same.

Under the buckskin tunic, Moon Feather's breasts rise and fall with quick breaths from our run. The leather pulls tight over the rounded swell and then loosens again. He glances my way and my eyes slide like water, unstuck as I tilt my head toward the thicket.

A smile pulls his lips to thin lines. "I will beat you again, River Song. A young buck for the ceremony tonight."

I do not glance at him, lifting my chin and arching brows. "You can have the buck, Moon Feather. I hunt a soft skinned doe."

There is the sound of crushed leaves from a misstep.

"Chew this, River Song."

The pain swirls red before my eyes, but Moon Feather's fingers are cool against my jaw. I know she is there with me, but no sight comes. I flail in the dark to find her. Her hand clasps mine, stopping its search.

"Chew, my brother and sleep. The pain will pass."

Toes dig earth, rooting in the soil. Crouched in the earth like stone, I can stay motionless for hours. The doe stands still in the dappled sunlight of the clearing. High bushes brush her knees. The long muscle of my back sparks in ache as I hold the bow drawn, the arrow pointing to the doe's heart.

Her ear pulls back, muzzle twitching. The air is slow here. She smells our scent. Her eyes are wide but she does not bolt. Her neck lowers and she sniffs the young leaves again.

Moon Feather looks sidelong at me, face taunt. There are questions in his dark eyed gaze. I wait.

"No, don't move. River Song!"

The pain is fire. In my dream, I had forgotten the injuries. Sweat bursts across my lips, my back arching against the ground. The fingers of my good right hand twine into a pelt that feels like thick fur. Moon Feather's hands are on my right shoulder and chest. She tries to hold me still, but I am stronger. The pain is stronger.

My arrow flies the moment the doe jumps, maybe the moment after. Moon Feather's arrow follows after mine. He waited though he was first to see this doe I have been seeking for weeks. The kill is to be mine.

When we reach her, it is Moon Feather's arrow in her neck. It is Moon Feather's knife and prayer that takes her life as I stand watching them. My arrow is in the woods.

Moon Feather's hands linger on the sand colored fur of the doe's neck, his strong fingers the color of clay. Eyes as black as his hair look up to me with a move more graceful than any other hunter's.

"We can switch arrows."

I stare, not comprehending the words. Moon Feather waits, our gaze not parting. My eyes widen and I look away.

"This is your doe. It should be your arrow. I have not been seeking her."

"No."

Moon Feather's eyes narrow. "No one would need know."

"No, it is your kill. I missed. I will wait until it is my time."

Moon Feather's shoulders relax, rounding into a gentle curve despite his muscle. He snorts.

"You shouldn't have missed."

He says it under his breath, but so I can hear. I plunge my knife into the soft belly to spill the intestines. Dying warmth flows over my hand. With a breath, the unease in my chest is gone. This is Moon Feather's deer and I must be careful. Slowly, together we butcher the doe. Her hide is soft and supple. She will make Moon Feather leggings or a new tunic better than the rough one he has now. Clothing that will sit well on his long legs and curve of hips, traits which have always allowed me to distinguish his silhouette against the sky when we hunt at night. No other hunter in the tribe is like him. I make sure not a drop of blood stains the tan fur.

"Moon Feather?"

She comes and kneels next to me, blocking the glow of the fire that seems too bright. Moon Feather places a wooden scoop to my lips, water mixed with herbs floods my mouth. Its clear stream runs down my throat.

The glow of the fire highlights her cheek, the swell of her bosom. I lay back wrapped in the grizzly's fur watching her, aware of the soft rise and fall of my breath.

There is a line between her brows. She bites her lower lip. Only once before have I seen her hold back words.

"You should sleep, River Song. There is still much healing to be done."

“Who will you ask?”

We are washing blood and sinew from our knives in the cold water of a stream. I pretend not to understand.

“Ask?”

Moon Feather kicks water at me, not believing my ignorance.

“Who is the doe skin for, when you finally catch one. If you can.” He gives me a low lidded look but laughter curls his lips. I take the challenge of my hunting brother. I lunge and grip his forearms, my foot locking against his calf. He is too used to our tussles and is ready. Our legs and grips mesh as we shove against each other. After a few minutes neither of us has lost our footing, but we have managed to soak ourselves in the liquid ice. Lightheartedness weakens the game. For one moment, we are laughing against each other, legs entwined. He lets go and flops onto the pebbles of a shoal.

“Well?”

I sit down next to him picking a stone and tossing it into the turbid water. The wet buckskin clings tight to my calves.

“Chief Lone Tree says Black Fawn would make a good wife. The ancestors have shown him this in a dream.” I stare at the water where it flows over rocks.

Stones shift as Moon Feather rolls to lay on his back, staring up at the wisp of blue sky above the reach of green leaves. He tucks his hands under his head.

“Your father would suggest her. Elder Hawk says Black Fawn is meant to have many children. He sees the sign on her.”

My throat is tight when I swallow.

“Yes, that is what Lone Tree wants.”

Moon Feather’s gaze flicks to me then skyward. White clouds drift across his dark eyes.

“After the loss of your mother and sister . . . a large family has been his long held wish.”

I blink and lay back to watch the sky as well, my head placed near my hunting brother. Our bodies angle away toward different paths. It is some time before I trust my voice.

“Will you choose a woman? Or will you be like Elder Hawk, a healer and peacemaker but not a husband?”

Moon Feather blinks rapidly, his breath quick for a moment. I watch him until he turns to look at me. He sits up quickly, looking first to his hands and then away into the woods.

“No, I . . . I may be two spirited but . . .” His breath comes in short puffs and he will not look at me. There is something vulnerable in his face that I have not seen since

we were children and he was learning to be a boy, an uncertainty. It rounds his face, fills out his lips. I sit up slowly.

“But what, Moon Feather?”

His eyes dart like a trapped animal until he shuts them, breathes in slow. Now he looks directly at me, calmness over his eyes again. A lift of his chin and his face is smooth and tight, strong and confident.

“It is easier to learn to heal and speak peace without the worry of another. No, I do not plan to join with anyone.”

He does not look away. His gaze does not crack. But it isn't what he was going to say. I cannot find a voice to bring forth the words that have gone unspoken.

Senses come back with small increments. First I am aware that there is sunlight flickering through leaves brushing my eyelids. Then I hear a bird call. I smell the faintness of wet ash in the light breeze. And I am aware of the trickle of a stream over pebbles. Pebbles that are also under me, rounded shapes bulging through the thickness of the grizzly fur. The grizzly that attacked me meaning to take my life. The black death that Moon Feather killed to save me, Moon Feather, who is trying to heal my body. I open my eyes.

The green leaves of the trees come into focus first. They are on a bank above a stream a man's width wide. The pebble beach rises from the water to where I lay. The fire ring with a wisp of smoke lays between me and the water's edge. There is no sign of Moon Feather.

I push myself up with my good arm, finding a log against my back already placed to support me. My left leg is bandaged but whole. Scratches rip across the right, but the scabs are well formed.

My left arm is not so fortunate. I can barely form a fist, the muscles weak or unresponsive. I trace my good hand up my arm. It is shaking by the time I reach the thin membrane of the bandage.

“Leave it, River Song. You still have healing to do.”

She walks around to drop the limp form of a rabbit next to the fire. Dark worry in her eyes is lightened by relief.

“You are feeling better?”

I try to nod, but my neck is stiff. Unthinking, I reach to feel how close the line to death was. The wounded muscle is sticky with salve and crusted with scab. Moon Feather's hand pulls mine away. I hold onto her as firmly as I can.

“It must have been very close.”

“It was and has been several times as you healed. I could barely get her off of you. She would not let you go.”

“But you did.” The fingers of my left hand caress the fur I lay on.

“Yes.” She lets my hand go, stronger now than I am. Moon Feather picks up the rabbit and begins to skin it. Across her upper arm are parallel marks, healing as are mine. I suck in a breath.

“You are in pain?” She is half up ready to remedy what she cannot fix.

“No,” the answer rips from me in a shot of exhaled air.

She sits back, face slowly growing distant as muscle tighten. She looks at me as if I am a stranger. For a moment, Moon Feather turns back to the rabbit, removing the skin in one pull. When he looks back up at me, his eyes are unreadable as a moonless night.

“Why did you walk into her territory, River Song?”

“Why did you follow me, Moon Feather?”

Only the wind and the stream answer.

Moon Feather walks first, resting the pole on his shoulder. The doe’s head swings near his calves, the delicate hooves lashed tightly to the staff between us. The rear is towards me. It is Moon Feather’s deer.

The scouts see us before we are near the camp, whooping of our success. Most of the tribe is out of the longhouse when we arrive in the clearing. Black Fawn ducks around her brother’s shoulder, her small form lithely moving to a better vantage point. Her skin is the tan of dry leaves. Her black hair glistens like a midnight river. Under the straps of her sleeveless dress, her breasts swell as soft mounds echoed by the wide curve of her hips.

Black Fawn’s eyes search mine, wanting some nod to deny what she sees. She wants the truth to be a joke. I stare back at her without blinking, conveying nothing. I will not be placing the doe at her feet for a union dress. She looks down at the trodden earth.

I look away as well, finding Chief Lone Tree’s eyes locked on me. My father’s gaze holds disappointment. I gently lower the doe to the ground before Elder Hawk’s hut where he stores his medicines. Where he lives with Moon Feather, teaching him the ways of healing. My chest is tight as I turn and walk away alone and empty handed.

Moon Feather avoids me. He is a healer and so can see the disease in my soul. He keeps his distance as if it were contagious, only drawing near to lance my shoulder wound and change the bandage. When I wake from the pain, the camp is always empty.

“A full moon cycle has passed,” he says into the early evening sky.

I do not look up. I hear him set the fish he has caught on the stones next to the fire, water droplets hissing on the rocks.

“You should go and tell them where we are.” I watch my foot as I flex the ankle slowly. Every motion is fire. It is the only feeling I know.

Moon Feather is silent so that finally I look towards him. Shadows hide his eyes. He could be an ancestor come to accuse me. I turn back to my leg, raising the knee with the help of my hands.

“The tribe will have gone to the summer grounds near the great water now. It will take three quarters of a moon to walk there.”

A muscle twitches over my jaw. I stare off into the dark night upstream. I can barely walk. I cannot hunt. My gaze falls defeated and I scratch at the stones with my left heel.

Owls talk to each other while Moon Feather cooks the fish. The brook speaks the language of water. From the shadows where moonlight does not reach, I watch Moon Feather. There is an ease of movement that was not there before, a fluidity instead of cautious control.

When he thinks I am not watching, his face is relaxed. Round cheeks, full lips, a gentle chin reside above the men’s buckskin tunic and hunting bow. Summer and still he will wear clothes. When he thought I was sleeping, I have seen him swim in the stream. Then there is no doubt about what he is no matter how well he hunts or how he holds himself.

Moon Feather comes and hands me a spitted fish from the fire. I take the stick carefully so that he does not have to touch my hand. He watches me a moment and then moves back to the fire to sit and eat. He does not even look at me. A passing owl would think he sat alone on the beach. I am not here.

“You cannot do this.”

Moon Feather explodes upwards. The statement carries into the night on his angry voice. The forest grows quiet to his intrusion as he stalks towards me. I try to back up but the log blocks my retreat. I cannot get my good leg under me to stand. There is no avoiding his strong grip on my good arm though I try to shy away.

“River Song, I can heal your body but I do not know how to heal your soul. What has happened to you?”

“Where will we go look to for your doe today, River Song?”

I glance at Moon Feather from the corner of my eye. “I am going over the ridge to the next valley’s forest.”

Moon Feather glances up at the sun. “It will be a long walk back with your doe. We should go soon.”

“I am going alone.”

Moon Feather steps back, his gaze jerking to my face. We have always hunted together.

I step forward. “You are the one who keeps stealing my kill. If you are not there, you cannot prevent me from catching my doe.”

“I have given you first shot every time since the day you said you hunted a doe. You have missed every time, River Song.” There is an angry line on his brow and he leans forward into my accusations.

“No, you have stolen her. You have kept me from the path my ancestors demand. I do not need you. I hunt alone.”

I turn and fly into the forest, faster than Moon Feather can run. I head beyond the paths of our tribe up towards the high ridge and the quiet valley beyond.

I cannot escape Moon Feather’s grip, but I can avoid his eyes. He cannot force my soul to let him in to read what is written there. He relaxes his stance, sitting back on his heels. He does not let go.

The fire spits. The night wind brushes my hair across my face. Moon Feather’s grip is like the grizzly’s. Powerful, it touches what is deep inside of me. He will not let go even as I begin to shake with the effort to hold back the words.

“I do not wish to marry Black Fawn.” I rest my good arm on my right knee, leaning over to pant in air.

Moon Feather releases me, but stays crouched a hand’s space away. I can feel his gaze, sharp and clear.

“It is not too late. You have promised her nothing. You can choose another woman.”

I shake my head. My chest burns. “There is no other woman I want.”

He is quiet again, but I will not look into his eyes. I watch the liquid blackness of the stream.

“You want to join with a man?”

“No!” The air explodes from me. I suck in a sob, “Yes.”

My head hangs low. I try to find air to breathe through the tight passage of my throat. Moon Feather's gentle hands are on my forearms pressing with the weight such a confession imparts. A presence, a comfort, but still he does not understand. Finally, I look up into my friend's eyes knowing what he will read there.

His gaze is dark compassion. I wait. His eyes widen slightly, shift away then back. His breath comes quick, high in his chest. I do not look away. Lips part slightly, but no words come on Moon Feather's breath. I hold his forearm now, limbs interlocked. His body is taught as a bow, frozen somewhere between staying and going.

Before he can decide, I lean forward pressing my lips to his. There is no acknowledgement. They are the tight thin line of my hunting brother's mouth. I do not pull away. I close my eyes, feel our breaths intermingled, the warmth of skin.

With a soft moan, her lips soften and respond. Her body's tension leans toward me instead of away. She presses against me, her hands finding my chest. Wary with a healer's memory of wounds, she avoids my shoulder. Moon Feather kisses me so hard I feel like she takes my breath. I take it back again from her.

My hands find her skin soft as any woman's under the buckskin shirt. Her breasts fill my palms, responding to my touch. She pulls off the shirt at the same moment I push it up, my lips finding the gentle bend of her shoulders, the line of her collar bone. Her hands trace my muscles, down my thigh.

We do not stop to speak. We do not stop until there is no way to deny what we feel or what we have done. The blood of her first joining filters through the pebbles of the beach. We move together in moon and fire light.

"What is it that you would have said, when I asked you about choosing a wife?"

Moon Feather is nestled beside me. The grizzly pelt covers our naked bodies. She tucks her chin, pressing her forehead against my shoulder. A smile bubbles across my lips.

"I wanted to say that I am two spirited, but my body . . . and my heart are that of a woman. I do not want to take another woman for a wife."

Her voice is higher, more musical. She props herself up on her elbow to look down at me.

"That I could not choose you, be with you other than as a brother, has been the only regret I have that I was born with the spirit of a man and a woman."

I cup her cheek, my fingers entwining with her long hair. It is easy to pull her down to me and kiss her. I can feel her smile against my lips.

"What will we do when we go back. I do not want anyone else."

Sobriety is a thin veneer over the glow of her joy. “Do not worry, River Song. You have a lot of healing to finish yet. We will be here awhile longer.”

I wake to find the blankets next to me empty. The fire is nearly dead. Moon Feather must have left before dawn’s light. I take the blankets with me as I go to rekindle the fire. The air has a chill. The seasons are starting to turn. I have seen brown on the ferns and reds by the saplings in the wet bogs as I walked.

My strength is returning. Soon we will have to leave. Our tribe will return to the winter grounds, two days walk from here at my pace. The pale patterns of the grizzly’s attack will tell our tale before we open our mouths.

Moon Feather comes back before the sun is a hand high in the eastern sky. Her face is tight, the muscles pulled back almost into a man’s face. There is only softness around her lips, a worry in the corners of her eyes. I move to sit next to her and she subtly shifts away, standing and walking to the stream. Worry blooms in my chest.

“What is it, Moon Feather?”

She stands rigid with her back to me, buttocks flat and shoulders back.

“Nothing, River Song.” Her voice is tight, lower and empty. I open my mouth to speak but he continues, “The season is late. I may hunt a deer. It will be a half a moon before the tribe returns and there is nothing left of your tunic. You will need more than what you wear now.”

“Is that what worries you? Going back to the tribe?”

Moon Feather blinks, looking to the side and the man’s face is gone. Tiredness is heavy on her shoulders, a brooding under her eyes. “No . . . no it isn’t that.” She looks down but does not say what it is.

He comes and goes the next few days. Moon Feather brings a buck, but it does not dissipate the worry she wears. Only when Moon Feather wears the face of my hunting brother does he seem to have confidence, but it is cold and impatient. He shifts away when we share a meal by the fire, leaves to hunt even when our bellies are full. I see less and less of her.

I am not surprised to wake one night and find Moon Feather gone. He does not return by midmorning nor noon. I fish for my dinner, catching extra. Moon Feather does not come. I sit by the fire more than sleep, keeping it fed. The forest and I wait. I think he would have told me if he’d gone to see if the tribe has returned. I think.

Dawn rises with chill, highlighting the changing leaves. Our time is almost over. Or perhaps it has passed. I pick up the buckskin and continue to sew my new tunic and leggings. My stitches are becoming good though my left hand aches after a time. I eat the remaining fish. Moon Feather is not back by night.

Emerging from the depths of sleep, I am first aware of another presence. The fire is roaring in the cold night. Moon Feather sits between me and its golden glow. Then I realize she is crying.

“Heart of Mine, what is it?”

I sit behind her, pulling her against me and into the warmth of blankets wrapped around us. She trembles against me, crying silently. Despite the anxiety caused by her tears, I am happy to have her back. I brush wet strands of hair from her face.

As her tears slow we sit in silence a moment, watching the fire. It snaps over the gurgle of the low running stream. Finally, she turns to look at me. I have never seen her eyes so large or so full of doubt.

“I have not bled in the last two moons.” Her voice is rough from crying. Tears spill over the curve of her cheek. “I went to gather the herbs I needed to end”

A shard of the coldness born of winter’s night lodges inside of me. She trembles like she will fall apart. She raises her fist, turning her hand to open it palm up. A ball of unnamed herbs crushed by clenched force nestles in her palm. The smell of bitter medicine inundates the night air.

“I could not take it. River Song, I don’t know what to do.”

Warmth rushes back into me so fast that I am left dizzy. My hand covers hers, opening her fingers wider. I find the ball of herbs, gather them gently and throw them into the fire. She sobs against my lips, our passion hotter than flames. My hands enfold her, explore her and find the slight rise of her belly. Tears fill my eyes. Fierce possession floods my chest. Joy fills my soul. I kiss her like the first time until it is our only air, until each other is all we know.

The shout of the scouts brings unexpected lightness to my step. My tribe, our tribe, who we haven’t seen since the spring. It does not change the heaviness in my chest. I stop to look at Moon Feather, who has stopped to look at me.

In the warm concern of her eyes, I can see the exhaustion the two day walk has had on me. She hovers almost wearing the mask of a hunter, hardening her face, changing her gait and stance. One breath more and you would think her a young man. But soon the child in her belly will pull her unmistakably into the shape of a woman, our child. The nervous fear in her keeps her eyes round and her hand on my arm.

“I cannot be just a wife. I cannot be other than what I am.”

“I know, Moon Feather. I would not want you to be.”

I kiss her on her forehead. She compresses her lips, tries to suppress her fear. We have no answers on what to do. Maybe Elder Hawk can help us. It is our only plan.

The shouting in the village is a chaotic roar as we approach the clearing. Calm Water runs to my side touching me with a quick jab and whooping to find I am flesh and not a spirit. He has grown these moons we have been away. He races back to the tribe calling everyone to come.

They have. I walk forward shirtless so that the story of my wounds can be read. A necklace of three inch fangs dangles around my neck. I hear the hisses and whispers of awe. Moon Feather walks quietly beside me. His silent presence the answer to how I survived. The grizzly pelt rolled tightly under his arm further proof. He tries to be confident, tilting his head proudly at his trophy of fur and the necklace of claws he wears, at the healing he has worked. But I see through to her worry. The proud hunter and healer is a shallow cover of one side of the two souls that inhabit her.

The crowd parts and I see my father Chief Lone Tree. His frame is more stooped than I remember, his eyes amazed at the sight of me so that he finds no words of greeting for his son. His eyes fall to Moon Feather, crinkling with gratitude. His shoulders rise with a great breath.

A woman stumbles and I turn to see Black Fawn wearing a doe skin dress. She stands next to her new husband, Changing Wind. One band of worry falls away.

“I thought, we thought, you were gone from us, River Song.” Her sweet eyes hold apologies. I touch her shoulder gently.

“You have done well, Black Fawn. I cannot draw a bow. I could not hunt for you. You have made a wise match.”

Changing Wind’s eyes close, his shoulders relaxing. We touch foreheads, my tribe brother and I. My spirit thanks his for making at least one thing this day simple and good.

Next to me, Moon Feather has stirred. She stands straight, eyes flashing. A smile touches her lips.

“Elder Hawk, I need to ask your permission to marry.”

There is a murmur through the tribe as Moon Feather stands before her teacher. Surprise crosses the pride in his eyes as he looks at her. But he does not blink.

“River Song cannot yet hunt. It will be some time before he can provide for himself. It is the right of a Two Spirit to take a tribe member as spouse when they cannot fend for themselves.”

I cannot mask the glow that radiates from my chest. Elder Hawk looks at me and knows without words what has come to pass. But he does not speak. In my case, it is

not so easy and not merely his permission that must be sought. The disagreement of Chief Lone Tree is a heavy rock wanting to pull us down.

I turn to my father, breathe in and out. I find my feet again.

“Father, Moon Feather has the spirit of a man, but also the spirit and heart . . . and body of a woman. She already carries my child.”

Chief Lone Tree shakes, his gaze refocusing as he turns to look at Moon Feather next to me as if it is the first time he has seen her. Liquid moistens his eyes but does not spill over. The months of mourning have etched hollows in Lone Tree’s proud face, the heavy loss he felt apparent as he lets go of his refusal.

Chief Lone Tree opens his arms to my spouse.

“You bring me back not only my son but also my grandchild. Thank you, Moon Feather.”

As the tribe shouts our return and union, Moon Feather and I hold each other, hearts pounding and bodies joined for all the tribe to see.