

LAND - WATER - SKY

NDÈ - TI - YAT'À

KATLIÀ



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For my mother, my Àma

Excerpt

STARS ANSWER

Sky
alight in flame
paints a final stroke
upon our path

night falls
wrapping us
in charcoal silt

silk blanket sky
will bare only the whispers
of our deepest longing

remains from the fire
strewn up as stars
ancient answers to questions
yet unnamed

– MOE CLARK –

TERRA NUILLIUS (3-5)

...The vaults of the forest.
The rush of the waters.
The swell and sink of air.
The sweetness of nature.
The passage in the rocks.
The lightning.
The flame.
The foaming waters.
The narrow, deep cavern.
The nature of the light.
The steep, rugged ascent.
The path that curiously wound among rocks and trees.
The tumbling river.
The healing waters.

—JORDAN ABEL—

ÀMA

*Northwestern Hemisphere
Time Immemorial ...*

A woman from a small valley on the border of where land meets endless water is approached by an outsider as she collects fresh water from a pure, glistening stream in the quiet of the early morning.

The dark presence makes its way towards her, slowly dipping its arched heels in the water until its shadow falls over the woman, blocking the water's sheen at her feet.

Bracing herself, she drops the caribou stomach she's using to collect water and watches as it slowly swept away by the swift current of the stream. She places her hand on the dagger hanging at her waist and cautiously turns to look up at what is looming behind her. She's alarmed when she sees that it is a man with broad shoulders, an impressive jawline and eyes the colour of the sun. More animal than human, she thinks.

He smiles wryly at her, his teeth sharp. She notices that his nails are long and opaque as his large hands reach out to save her caribou bag from drifting farther downstream. His thick black hair falls loosely around his chiselled face, hiding the fullness of his sinister grin from her view.

His voice is a low rumble as he speaks to her in her native

tongue, telling her he has been separated from his family. He fills her water bag and hands it back to her as an offering. Against her better judgment, she looks into his eyes. Taking pity on him, she *gestures* him to follow her.

Without hesitation, he follows her to her camp, where there are children playing, laughing and running between the trees. When they see the stranger, they stop their games and back away slowly, trying to stay out of sight. Even at such a young age, they know to keep their defences on full alert.

The oldest child whispers to the youngest to run and tell the Headman that a stranger is in the camp. In his hurry, the child runs so fast he trips over the thick coniferous tree roots jutting out of the ground. Pressing his fingertips firmly into the earth, he pushes off and runs faster than before until he reaches the Headman's tent to advise the Elder that there is a stranger in their midst.

When the Headman hears the news, he follows the boy, but a sudden commotion diverts his attention. The stranger had already made his way into the middle of the camp. With the woman by his side, he announces his presence.

One look, and the Headman can see that the stranger has the power of bad medicine in his eyes. Shoving his spear into the ground, he bellows, "Najtĕ!" and motions for the outsider to leave. But the stranger stands his ground.

The young woman's older brother barges through the growing crowd to see what is causing the uproar. When he sees his sister is under the man's trance, he charges at the stranger but is thrown to the ground with ease.

The stranger takes in a deep breath, inhaling his own strength as if the confrontation has solidified him somehow.

On the other side of the camp, a strong wind blows into the Medicine Man's tent and alerts him that something is wrong. He

can feel a wicked chill flood the camp. The elderly man had not left his tent for many days, but the intrusion forces him to break his fast.

Leaning heavily on his stick, he walks out into the daylight, but his world stays dark. Blindness had melded his nights and days into one long ago, but he need not see to know that a darkness is near.

He walks slowly, carefully, towards the dark presence while chanting a prayer meant to drive evil spirits away. But the stranger hears the Medicine Man’s song in the distance and lets out a loud howl. Waves of sound send rippled currents through the air, causing the Medicine Man to fall to the ground and shield his ears from the pain.

The small community huddles together, watching the Headman and the stranger clash. They knew this inhuman curse would one day come. Their ancestors had warned them that they could only protect themselves from the curse by avoiding direct eye contact, for the stranger has the power to grip all who look his way.

But it is too late for the woman. From the moment she looked into his eyes, she fell victim.

Her mother and father push their way through the crowd. Seeing that their daughter is in danger, they run to her but are held back by the hunters, who are now standing on guard.

Her mother cries out when she sees that her daughter’s eyes are lifeless, “Ts’jwi!”

Her father tries to warn his daughter that the man is not of the human world, “Wehji!” but she can no longer see or hear them.

Her mother’s words echo as she screams out desperately “Wehji!” But the woman has already succumbed to his deception and fallen into a trance.

The stranger takes the woman by the hand and pulls her away from the madness he intentionally created. He wants the people to know who he is, that he is alive and dangerous just as the stories told. He wants them to know that he has and will always rule the land. He knows he is now marked for death, but he has no cause for concern for there is no man on Earth that can stop him.

Without a fight, the woman walks by his side with no feeling left in her heart. Her father tries one last desperate time to stop the man from taking his daughter. He lunges at the stranger from behind with the sharp end of his axe, but he is no match as the stranger evades the blade. Picking the woman's father up by the neck, he throws him into a nearby smoldering fire.

The woman's mother runs to her husband's side, trying to put out the flames while their only daughter slips into the wild as the embers flicker and die in the darkness that quickly swallows the sun in a great eclipse.

The man brings the woman to a large crumbling cave far from her home, in the darkest, most desolate part of the forest. There, she eventually gives birth to their children.

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As her children grow, the woman notices that they do not resemble her. Her skin is soft, where theirs is thick and rough. Her hands are able to work with small objects, while theirs are clumsy and they walk on them like feet.

Her hair grows out of the top of her head, and she braids it to one side to keep it out of her face when working, but her children's hair cannot be tamed. It grows unevenly in thick, wiry patches from their brows to the backs of their necks. The tops of their feet and hands, covered.

During the night, she often hears them making howling noises in their sleep. When excited or angry they nip and bite one another. As each day passes, she notices that their features are changing drastically — they are beginning to look less and less human.

Then one cold morning she finds her firstborn son sleeping outside the cave on the frozen ground. He should be frozen dead in the frigid air, but when she approaches him, she can see his bare back rise and fall. She turns his shoulder towards her, and a heave of cold wet air rises out of his wide nostrils.

Smelling of copper, his face and hands are covered in blood. At first, she worries that her son might be injured, and she gasps in fright, but she soon realizes that it is not her son who is hurt, but the animal whose remains are in his grip. The bird’s corpse is a mangled mess, its tiny bones poking out next to its spilled guts full of half-digested pebbles. She can see that it is a ptarmigan by the tarnished white feathers that are stuck flat and wet to her child’s grinning face.

As she slowly wakes from the curse, she starts to notice similar traits and markings in the father of her children. She is afraid to admit that his figure has a striking resemblance to a wild man-like animal, like the stories that she was warned about as a child, the stories that are now flooding back to her.

His thighs are bent upwards and his feet slightly lifted, his torso much larger than the rest of his physique. When he looks in her direction, she feels a sudden flood of adrenaline fill her body. When he gets too close, her heart beats out of rhythm and she struggles for air. She does not know why his presence is causing her senses to be on high alert; all she knows is that she is in danger. She is slowly becoming aware of the difference between reality and the sleeping state she has been living in.

He catches the light in her eyes one day as she studies his

stance, watching as he preys on a small rabbit. His shoulders raised and his head low, he follows the small grey and white animal with precision. Through waves of dancing flower plumes, he tracks the rabbit until he has it cornered. Crouching down to pounce, he sees her watching his every move from afar.

Intrigued by her awareness, the predator ignores his prey and moves in on a more satisfying kill. Standing tall, he rolls his head and cracks his neck, slowly turning his gaze to the mother of his children, the woman he should have loved but feels nothing but hatred for.

His hostility cuts through the long silence that lingers in the space between them as the rabbit scurries away to safety. There is nothing stopping him from taking her life, except the faint smell of fresh picked sweetgrass that lies in the bottom of her basket drifting through the air, disorienting him. He snuffs out the smell in one gruff blow and walks slowly towards her.

As he nears, she can see for the first time how foreboding his stature is. Knowing that she has nowhere to run, she stands her ground.

He stops so close to her that she can feel his hot breath on her face. Searching her eyes for any sign of emotion, he commands her to look at him, “Seghajda.” His low voice rumbles through the forest.

The woman blinks and looks away, shaking her head in defeat. “Ile,” she says in refusal.

In that moment, they both realize she is no longer under his influence. The light in her eyes has returned, and she is slowly feeling and thinking for herself once again.

He could keep her entranced, but he no longer has a need for her. After all, she has given him what he wanted — his pack.

The man waits until night falls to transform himself, to finally reveal to her who he truly is, a cruel and merciless creature that takes pride in his atrocities, causing terror in his prey.

He watches her sleep in the gleam of the moonlight. Loathing her, he waits for her to wake so she can see him one last time before he ends her life.

The woman wakes when she senses that she is being watched. She opens her eyes to see a dark shadow a few feet in front of her. With his head low, the beast raises the edges of his mouth, exposing his pointed fangs, and lets out a low snarl. His yellow eyes flicker, igniting the inside of the cave as he makes his way towards her, giving her a glimpse of her own death.

The woman doesn’t want the creature to pick up on her fear, but it’s too late. He senses it before she recognizes it for herself.

She naively looks around for the man that she sleeps beside but he is gone. In that moment, her unbelievable nightmare becomes a reality. To her great misery, she knows without a doubt that her children’s father and the beast that is now towering over her are one and the same.

She glances at her sleeping children, huddled together on a thick mound of muskox wool in the corner of the cave, but she dares not take her eyes off the animal for long.

She begs him in a whisper not to hurt them and starts to get up to run to the corner of the cave where she keeps her blade — the same blade she now wishes she had driven into his heart the day she first saw him at the creek.

But he doesn’t give her time to bring herself to her feet. He lashes out at her with his sharp claws, knocking her to the ground, leaving her with three deep gashes below her knee, her leg sliced clean through to the bone.

Burrowing her face into her bed of matted wool, she lets out

a muffled scream. Whatever is about to happen to her, she does not want her children to see it.

He stands over her on all fours, breathing heavy steam on her face. Opening his mouth to end her life, he is distracted by the sound of their youngest growling, half asleep. As the beast briefly looks away, she hits him hard on the side of his large snout with all her strength.

With enough time to stumble to the corner of the cave, she quickly picks up her blade and grips it tightly, but when she turns around it is too late. He has her cornered.

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The vicious monster paces back and forth for what seems like an eternity, taunting her and basking in his dominance over her. He revels in her helplessness as she holds the blade out at eye level, trying not to shake in fear.

Their young are now fully awakened, and to her utter disbelief they no longer resemble her children. They are like him. Unaware of what is happening, they tumble into one another, biting each other's tails, barking and grumbling, their fur coats gleaming.

The youngest, the runt of the litter, who bears a distinctive silver streak on the top of his head, tries to hide. Shaking profusely with terror and with his tail tucked in, he wets himself.

The woman holds her hand to her mouth and shakes her head, crying helplessly as she looks down at her distorted children. Enraged at the trickery the creature has put upon her, she charges at him with her blade in a sudden protective maternal fury. Diving at him with all her force, she drives the dagger into his flesh, piercing his paw so savagely that she rips his middle claw off.

Fleeing the cave, the woman looks back in fear that at any moment the creature might ambush her, but he only goes as far as the edge of the cavern, howling out after her in annoyance. Giving up the fight, he lies down and licks his wound, certain she will not survive in the wilderness alone. It will only be a matter of time until she eventually starves or freezes to death in the fast approaching winter. He is sure of it.

As he lies at the edge of the cave, he howls at the full blood moon while all but one of his offspring follow him out into the night. One by one they stand by his side, howling out at all they would ever know of love, their mother.

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The woman runs for hours until she notices that her hands are covered in blood and still gripping the blade that spared her life. Sickened by the sight of it, she drops the weapon and brushes her hands clean with the dead autumn leaves at her feet.

When the sound of his deafening howl fades in the distance, she is reminded of the agony of her wounds. Leaning against a small tamarack tree, she clutches her leg in pain. She knows the deep gashes will become infected by morning if she does not tend to them. So she rests her cheek heavily on the rough bark, begging the tree for mercy as she peels back its flaky grey cover to reveal a thick sap underneath.

Filling the gashes in her leg with gum, she winces in pain and rips pieces off her moosehide moccasins to wrap over the wounds and stop the bleeding. With no time to rest, she shuffles onward in discomfort until the tree medicine begins to work.

She spends countless days trying to find her way back to her home. Alone in the wild, she is constantly on guard for fear that the father of her children has followed her. But she holds on to

hope that his wound is enough to stop him from coming after her.

The survival skills that were ingrained in her from a young age give her the strength she needs to keep going through the cold and nearly unbearable nights, but she doesn't care about her own discomfort for she is so overwhelmed with sadness from having to abandon her children that she no longer feels pain.

She speaks out loud to them, hoping they can hear her in their hearts. She promises to come back for them and break their curse. She won't allow herself to think that they will turn malevolent like their father, for they are still her children.

The earth is just beginning to cover over in frost when she finally reaches the shoreline of the great lake. There, she finds evidence of human life and the familiar markings of home. She runs into the camp with the last of her strength and falls to the ground, cold and weak.

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When she wakes, she tells the Headman what happened to her children, trusting they will be saved. But in no time, the strongest men are sent to follow her tracks and find the cave with the full intention of hunting the beasts down and killing them, both man and children.

The woman runs after the hunters and begs them not to hurt her children, but her cries are ignored as they run into the forest to find the ungodly animals.

She refuses to believe that her children are monsters and that their lives must be sacrificed. In a last desperate attempt to save them, she points in the wrong direction, telling all who will listen that the cave can be found in the mountain range farther east. "YaaÒ!" she points. But her cries are in vain.

When the trackers find the blade that she dropped in the fallen leaves, they know they are close, but when they reach the cave it’s too late. The creatures have already fled into the wilderness, and all the hunters can find to prove their existence is a dark grey claw on the ground.

The woman never stops searching for her children and can be found wandering the forest alone, tirelessly calling out for them.

The young beasts and their father disperse throughout the land, wreaking havoc and causing great devastation as they expand their monstrous reign over the North.