

The Dreamwalker
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Snow drifted to its bed below the trees, falling from the branches to the wet dirt. Michael looked to the dampened pine needles that crept to the worn path, and stopped in its center. His knuckles showed white as he gripped the strap of his backpack. "Michael, you coming?" Kara asked, glancing behind. The scene of complete placidity and piercing light from the snow held him still, before finally pulling himself forward. Kara and Jason continued on the path, while Kate slowed for Michael to catch up to her.

"Hey, what's up?" Kate asked, at the slight tensing of her brow.

"It's nothing... just..." Michael paused, as if waiting for a reply posed from somewhere in the branches. The contrast of dark ground and enveloping ice of the new winter said nothing but the whispers of a bird call gliding overhead. "It's fine. Come here." Michael took up her hand in his to hold tightly, and they continued on. The two walked for a quiet while like this, until almost to fill the void of sight and sound, Michael asked absently how much farther there was to walk. Kate's answer fell to the ground before reaching his ears, and would have meant nothing to him had his view been on something other than the faint sound of a gliding river in the distance. Though his attention was divided to things past her voice, it still brought him comfort, and he was glad to be with her.

Their silent wanderings were centered and their hands loosened from each other by Jason's piercing voice. "Hurry up! We want to cut through these trees before dark". He called behind him, before resuming his animation about the trip to Kara. It had all come about from Jason, the clear outdoorsman of the four, who had found a cabin to rent by some connection in a river rafting group or hiking expedition. His friends had employed quite a lot of convincing to join him, but all eventually conceded, Kara for Jason and Michael and Kate for each other. The plan was to camp in a tent before night, and resume their trip to the cabin in the morning. It was too long to be spanned in a day, and lack of a true campsite would force a rugged stop some place off the path.

Somewhere in the lethargic sway of the trees and quiet voices of nature, the day had begun to vanish. The almost blinding glow of the snow and sky had fled into a sulking twilight of blue gray. The group stopped, and at Jason's assessment found a suitable place to camp, though it looked like any other. His instruction, combined with the uninterested assistance of the rest manifested into the rise of the tent. After laying their things under its shelter and seeing Jason make his final touches like an artist to a painting, the group separated. Jason pulled out the parts to a small stove and began demonstrating to the patient Kara its proper assembly, while Michael and Kate, to fill the interim of day and night, followed the gentle rush of the river Michael had heard earlier. Blueish light wafted through the winds as pines needles bent quietly under their feet. After passing a gentle incline, they came to clear water, and sat upon a boulder above its passing. The scene and their togetherness gave way to clear tranquility, and Michael and Kate were content. She rested her head on his shoulder as she often did, and in Michael's periphery, he watched her deep brown eyes, bright and darting as they always were. They turned their hands over in each others, and at the calm ambience of the forest, time seemed to fall to a stop.

After an indeterminate time, the scene began to vacate. The serenity of the bird calls and gentle wind through the trees had grown continuously quieter, and the lavender light had all but waned into darkness. Michael felt uneasy, and loosened his grip of Kate's hand. He climbed to a stance and took a brief gaze of the deserted scene across from him, before turning down to Kate.

"We should go."

Just as the words skipped across the still water, something began falling through the branches overhead. A crashing and snapping took Michael's view upwards, only to see a dark shape before being knocked to the side. A heavy blow to his arm and chest broke a breathless gasp from him, melding with Kate's scream. He staggered to regain his balance and get to Kate, but another blow turned his vision black.

Michael woke in the river, choking on the frigid water. Its flow rang in his ears and shivered in his hands. He lay soaking in the shallows, in manic blur to understand what had happened.

"Michael!"

He gasped and quivered at his name, only to see Kara's shape wading into the water. She eased him up and braced him to the bank. A deep ache emanated from his chest, worsening as he looked to see Jason raising Kate from the ground. Her body twitched to the faintest swing in her hanging arms, and her eyes had slammed shut.

"What happened!?" Kara shrieked.

"I... I don't know. We were by the water and something came out of the trees and hit us and... I don't know." Michael managed through labored breath and darting distraction. "Kate..." He threw his hand out toward her, only for a shooting pain to stab in his shoulder.

"There's a first aid kit in the tent." Jason said straightly, and trudged along with Kate's unconscious form.

Jason carefully set Kate down on a bedroll and Michael beside her. Her head lay back, skewed slightly to the left and accompanied by the faintest raise and lower of her breath. After removing her jacket and hat, Jason quickly scanned her body for a wound or sign of attack, only to find nothing. Aside from the faintest imperfection in her clothing, she looked as she always did. He felt her pulse and performed CPR, but she lay still. Michael pushed down the collar of his shirt to see his entire shoulder masked in a black bruise. He grimaced as he saw it, and laid back at Kate's side. His wide eyes fell on her, lifeless in every way.

"What's wrong with her?"

"She's unconscious, like with some kind of head trauma or concussion or something. I can't tell that she's hurt though."

"When is she gonna wake up?"

“I don’t know.”

Jason’s eyes sunk to the bottom of the tent, before flickering back up to Michael’s.

“What the hell happened back there?”

“I don’t know, okay? We were sitting there... and then something just...”

“What did it look like?”

“I don’t know. It just looked like a shape or a shadow or something.”

They both fell silent for a moment, before Jason bolted upright.

“Stay with her. I’m going to follow the trail and see if I can find help.”

Jason flung the tent door to the side and vanished through the opening, allowing a wistful shaft of dark blue light upon the couple’s feet. Michael drew one of the heavy wool blankets from the corner and laid it across them. He pulled Kate close so her head rested against his shoulder, just as the pangs of fear grasped onto his face. He held her tightly, and in a moment of prayer, shut his eyes like hers. “Just wake up.”

They laid in endless uncertainty as Kara sat silently adjacent from them. Michael’s head throbbed with pain, and his shoulder ached under Kate’s head. Her hands were cold in his, and her breathing could no longer be heard. Violently to shatter the inanimation, Kate convulsed forward and fell back. With eyes still shut, her mouth fell open to let out a near imperceptible whisper.

“Kate! Kate, wake up!”

Her eyes rolled and turned while still closed, and the murmur continued. Her face in its sickening pallor began to tremble before shaking, and finally fell motionless. Michael stared in incredulous horror at the seizure-like display before attempting to shake her to life. He called her name for a last time, only to be interrupted by a bursting yell from beyond the tent. An unstoppable charge came louder and louder, culminating as the door to the tent thrashed open. The mouth to the world shed but a blackness upon them, and held only the lamplit apparition of Jason, horring streaming in the contours of his face. Michael’s eyes adjusted to the scene to see none other but Kate held in Jason’s arms. Her eyes were wide and empty, life drained from them, and her clothes torn and shredded. Large portions of red covered her white sleeves, and a fatal wound stuck in her side. It was her. Michael knew it. His eyes shot to a small cut on her dangling hand, which he remembered happening the morning before. Heat and electricity boiled up in his arms and face. No greater fear had come to him before than to turn to what rested upon his shoulder, but in shuddering, he commanded himself to look. Its form stiffened and sat up, gently heaving under its perfect clothes, as its eyes finally fell open to meet with Michael’s. Its irises were sickly yellow, partially veiled by fallen hair. It cocked its head to the side and began to quake violently, just as a harrowing wail blew through the tent.

“Go! Move!” Jason screamed.

Michael sprinted to the door and burst through to the outside, leaving the tent enveloped in screams and slashes.

The outside was shrouded in a night of blackened blue, the only beacon the starlit snow trampled by Michael as he ran. With labored breath and sinking feet, he collapsed in the frozen dirt of the path. His stomach turned and mind grinded, trembling as he still felt the cold of whatever lay next to him moments before. The cry as he ran from the tent rattled through his ears and head, and as he gazed praying at the stars, the same squall stretched again through the trees from an unknown distance behind. He forced himself upwards and pressed on, over the dappled shadows of the moonlight.

Michael stormed through the forest scene, dragging his heavy body along. He remembered the cabin, and that it couldn't be much farther. He had pushed himself for miles it felt, and the quiet made him think he was finally alone. Pushing under branches and over stones, he topped one last slope in the path to behold a small roof and walls beside an elliptical pond, trees looming over the frozen water. Before he knew it, he was at the door. He spun the knob in his hand with no success before shattering the window and climbing through. His body fell to the wood floor of the cabin, his face brushing the fringe of the wool rug that covered it. The moon peered through the far window, as for a moment Michael squinted his sideways view at its shine. He rose from the floor and surveyed the cabin. It was shrouded in dust and virtually empty, except for an open book on the table beside him. Michael turned it to see the cover, titled in faded writing *Legends of the Northern Tribes*. His eyes drifted down the text, and while the words blurred together, he managed the page's opening paragraph:

Spanning the folklore of several tribes and passed through countless generations, the Dreamwalker is one of the most infamous legends in all of Native America. It is fabled as a malevolent spirit, possessing the ability to shapeshift to the appearance of any person or animal. Rituals to ward off the Dreamwalker's presence have been in practice for thousands of years, even going far enough for some tribes to outlaw the use of the color yellow, the tint of its eyes.

Michael slid his hands away from the pages and raised his eyes to the blank wall in front of him. A shiver shot up his spine as he heard the broken glass of the window crunch on the floor behind him. His body went cold, but he forced himself to turn. Before him stood Kate's shape, twisted in posture and fingers extended. Its size seemed to breathe in and out, pulsing smaller and larger. Hair draped across its eyes, and from behind it lay that horrific glowing stare. The ever familiar face of Kate seemed to tilt and contort, and its sob began once more to rise. Michael flung towards the opposite end of the cabin, but midway there, his arm was snatched back and a searing pain shot through his side. He jerked his chin below to see a wide scratch across his abdomen, pluming red. Stumbling to escape, he threw himself through the pondside window and onto the small dock above the water. He turned to go from the place, but he froze. An unseen force compelled his movement, and in a solemn march, he was over the pond's edge, crashing through the ice and into the frigid water. In it he sunk slowly, suspended in an atmosphere of cold. Control of his body was not his own, and he was left to the dark below. He tired, and could no longer hold his breath. He turned his gaze up a final time to meet a golden flash before the cobalt sky, the silhouette simply observing. Michael's eyes flickered shut, and for a final time, he opened them to see his own face peering down before disappearing into the night.