

Chapter Twelve/New Start

The previous story was not working well and I had too long a break in between with many side excursions. Since the goal of my writing is to just write... and not to have an actual novel ready to go I am finishing this month with a continuation of a story I began years ago. Here is the beginning of a novel about a new character in the universe I was creating...

Maunea was lost. She had come into the woods searching for the first nuts that fell and had gotten herself lost.

Mother said, "Stay within sight of the path. Stay in the area you know. Stay with your friends."

But Maunea had been so intent on picking up the nuts and filling her satchel and baskets that she had lost track of the path and her friends and was no longer in the area she knew.

She was lost.

She sat down on a stone to think and pulled out her mid-day meal that Mother had packed. Thoughtfully, she chewed the pie, leaving half for later. Carefully, she cut a piece of cake in four pieces and ate one. She started to drink water from her flask, then thought better of it and satisfied her thirst with the fruit Mother had sent along.

The berries were long gone in the woods, but Maunea knew there were still some roots that could be dug in an emergency.

She listened intently for any sound of voices that might lead her back to her friends. By now they should have missed her. She knew they would send the fastest runner back to the village, and the rest would try to find the place she had left them and follow her track.

She wasn't worried, but she was embarrassed. This sort of thing only happened to very young children normally, not to women almost old enough to partner. She shook her head and looked at her hands.

They were stained with nut juice from preparing the nutmeats for storage, and from making dyes. The dark brown, almost black of her fingertips gave way slowly to a rust-colored skin that was the hallmark of her birth clan. Silky pale hair covered her exposed arms, making her seem to glow in the waning afternoon light.

She stood up and looked back in the woods, trying to decide which direction she had come from. She could make her way partly back by following the landmarks she remembered.

It wasn't as if the woods were strange. She had been walking, hunting, gathering and playing in them for twenty summers. She hadn't reached the top of the mountain, which wasn't very big as mountains go, but she knew there were a few bare places that could help her spot a track to more familiar trails.

There. That large oak with the mistletoe hanging near the ground. She had passed that just before she realized she was lost. She picked up her satchel and baskets and walked carefully toward the tree, still scanning the ground for nuts and picking them up as she went.

The oak was ancient. It had twisted limbs and the ground was covered with the remnants of last year's acorns. Maunea looked carefully at the branches. There were good acorns still clinging to some of the branches. Looking around, she found a sturdy stick that had fallen and began to whack at the limbs. The tree shifted and acorns rained down around her.

She dropped the stick and collected them all. It took quite a while, but she was intent. It was rare to have fresh acorns this time of year. Mother would be pleased with the treat. She checked around the base of the tree, and found little beyond a small burrow and a large crack in the trunk. It was a good, sturdy stick, so Maunea decided to use it as a walking stick.

Looking into the crack, Maunea was startled to see an eye looking back at her. She jumped back, trembling. Setting the stick, satchel and baskets down at a distance from the tree, in the direction she thought she needed to go, she returned to the tree with a small branch. She looked inside again, and realized it was a reflection of her own face. With the branch, she felt around inside first, and feeling a hard smooth surface put her own hand in slowly.

There was a musty, corky odor that oozed out of the hole, but her fingers found the smooth surface and explored the edges. It felt like a man-made object, so she grasped it and pulled. It moved slowly, then emerged from the hole – it was a small mirror, with an intricately crafted frame. The sort of trinket a lover might give as a token.

She turned it over in her hand, noting the vining pattern and fading colors of paint that once clung to the piece. It was clearly very old, and from a far-off place. Maunea tried to remember where she had seen such a pattern before.

It must have been on traders' wagons that had come through. There were many travelers that passed through the village, selling wares, on their way from one big town to another. Most wagons were highly decorated with carving or painting of some sort.

COPYRIGHT 2012: This is a FIRST DRAFT, and all rights are reserved to the author

She brushed the damp wood off its surface and placed it in her pocket, then reached back into the hole. There was more...

A small, damp bag of leather, with unfamiliar coins inside. One looked like gold, the others were silver and bronze.

And more: A box of crystal. In the fading light, Maunea struggled to see what it held. The lid didn't want to move, so she gave up.

Fading light, Oh!

Maunea put the box and leather bag in the satchel and looked for the next familiar object down the hill. She was in luck, there was the boulder she had relieved herself by. She knew it was tall enough to give her a better view, so she trudged carefully down the slope and clambered up the stone.

The light was dimming faster now, and it was getting chilly. She considered starting a fire, and realized she didn't have her fire starting kit along. It was supposed to be an afternoon's nut-gathering...

She listened carefully for sounds. Far off, she thought she might hear her name, but it could have been the wind, rushing down the mountain in the tree tops.

She decided that the boulder was too exposed, and she had seen a clearing from it that she remembered, so she slid down and continued on her way.

It would be fully dark soon, and the edge of the clearing had a fallen tree, she remembered, that she could prop some branches against for a quick shelter. She was not too worried about spending the night out of doors at this time of year. It would not rain, and the largest animals had already moved along to winter territory. It would be cold, but she was used to cold.

Reaching the clearing, she watched from the edge of the trees for a moment, then skirted the grassy part where the mist was already rising, and moved toward the fallen cedar. Here, where the clearing was open to the sky it was brighter than in the woods. She set her satchel and baskets down and set to work.

With the walking stick, she leveled the few weeds and branches that were under the log, making sure to check for any hidden burrows or cornered animals before she started. The tree, however, was only recently toppled, and so the ground was clear.

Checking around for the best prospects, she found an evergreen with several branches hanging close to the ground. She pulled out the knife that hung on a sheath from her belt and sliced and pulled until the branches were free. She could sharpen the blade when she returned to the village.

COPYRIGHT 2012: This is a FIRST DRAFT, and all rights are reserved to the author

It didn't take many branches to create a small shelter for a woman her size, and before the last light faded she had fashioned a small bed of soft ends of the branches and some grasses, and pulled her possessions in front to serve as a barrier to curious animals. Clutching her walking stick, she fell into a deep sleep as the mist began to invade the forest.

word count: 1402