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The Crossing Wolves

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THE CROSSING WOLVES

Jeffrey W. Tenney

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Chapter II

The Boy

1

His grandfather had filled his hands with the dust of their ancestors and had thrown the dust into the wind. He had told the living ones how his youngest grandson would leave the camp and not return without words from the Great Living Wolf. These would be the words that would bring power back to the tribe, and by which the tribe would at last learn of its new homeland.

His grandfather had told the people of his grandson's special gift—a secret the family had kept until that day—the gift of knowing the thoughts of the four-legged ones, the *ah-mal*. Those who believed the old man had gazed upon him in wonder at hearing such a thing. Others had smiled and poked at one another, and finally walked away with grimaces on their faces and harsh words on their tongues.

“You will go to the highland made of three peaks,” his grandfather had told him after the meeting of the clans. “To the top of the one peak that lies open to the stars. There the wolf-spirit sometimes comes to sleep. Where it need only look up to see the eyes of its dead ones, the unliving spirits of its kind.

“There you will wait for the wolf-spirit to come to you,” Hay-Tuk-ba-ay's grandfather went on. “This may take a day and a night, perhaps ten days and ten nights. You will carry only water, your robe, and your knife. No food. You will return only with these things, and with the words of the Great Living Wolf.”

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At the meeting, Hay-Tuk-ba-ay had tried to speak, to tell the people that only one time had he heard the thoughts of the *ah-mal*, and that had been at age four. Only a dream, it now seemed. But his grandfather had put his old fingers to Hay-Tuk-ba-ay's lips and stopped him from speaking. And now Hay-Tuk-ba-ay sat alone on this hilltop, barren but for a few of the whitebark trees. Under the cold, dark sky of his third night, a sky offering not a single star for light. His belly tight and craving. His arms and legs as weak as a newborn's. Huddling inside his robe. Silently sipping from his waterbag and remembering what the heat of a fire felt like inside the roundhouse, and waiting for the sun to rise.

Hay-Tuk-ba-ay gently stroked the cluster of three crow feathers that hung from his braided brown hair. His eyes filled with tears again.

2

The day broke upon a dense cloud that had rolled up from the flatland during the night and draped itself over the hilltop. The sun's light muted to shifting shades of gray, Hay-Tuk-ba-ay could see little beyond the hilltop, although he remembered the broadleaf forest that lay to the south and ran right up against the foot of the hill. And he remembered the view of the distant valley to the west. Nothing moved in the gray. Not a sound upon the world. Not even the mice in the nearby rocks venturing from their holes.

He would eat this day, he told himself. He would find mushrooms and roots, and what he needed to make a fire. He was certain, now, that the wolf-spirit was not coming. Not to him. Probably not to any of the poor and homeless Hay-gan people. But especially not to one of their young boys, one who had not yet fought against the enemies, or even killed his own meat. If there was such a being as the Great Living Wolf, he would go to the Ani-gan, or to the Po-gan, the

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people with good horses and strongbows. Or to the Sobe-gan, whose axes, Hay-Tuk-ba-ay had heard, were made of the stone that never breaks, and who knew the secrets of growing the *tay-tu* root in the river valleys.

With the last of his hope gone, Hay-Tuk-ba-ay could feel nothing but the sudden sputter of his heart, fear surge through his veins, when he saw the shadow move amidst the deep gray. Low and stealthily it moved. Sliding in and out of his vision where the mist thinned and thickened. Passing to the side before turning toward him again.

Hay-Tuk-ba-ay stirred his sluggish mind. He thought to sing his people's song that welcomes the spirit.

*Great Spirit of the forest runner,
Silent watcher of the open,
Skillful hunter of the highland,
Dream-maker and provider,
Keeper of the Hay-gan heart,
Your people call to you now.*

But Hay-Tuk-ba-ay feared to sing. He doubted his voice.

He wanted the spirit to come, and dreaded that it would.

He sat still as the stones on the hill, quiet as the air. Just another lifeless form of no consequence. An old rotten stump to a careless eye. A crumpled bush.

But the spirit did not turn away. On it came, as Hay-Tuk-ba-ay tried to swallow the dryness from his throat. His hands began to shake the robe he held around him. He saw clearly now that the spirit came on four legs. That it came in the shape of a wolf. Emerging white from the gray mist. Eyes upon him—eyes as white as its coat.

"Hay-Tuk-ba-ay," the boy heard inside his head.

"You are a brave young man, Hay-Tuk-ba-ay," he heard.

His robe hanging loosely from his shoulders, Hay-Tuk-ba-ay hurried on light feet down from the hilltop and toward the broadleaf forest that sprawled to the southeast. Beneath a sun that now shone brightly, the forest beckoned with the promise of rabbit and squirrel. He had torn a strip of hide from his robe and fashioned it into a snare. He would find flint on his journey, and kindling for fire.

Grandfather Hay-Tuk-al, and the others, would have to wait to hear the words of the Great Living Wolf. The wolf-spirit had not given his words to Hay-Tuk-ba-ay without asking for something in return. His heart filled with such joy that it felt like a ripened melon in his chest, Hay-Tuk-ba-ay was happy to follow the wolf-spirit's instructions. Never before had Hay-Tuk-ba-ay known the feeling of mission. He had known duty—the scraping of hides, the chasing of deer toward the hunter's stand, the search for berries, the long night-watch for the coming of the hated Po-gan thieves to their camp. Mission was for the men and women. This wolf-spirit had said that Hay-Tuk-ba-ay was now a man. He had given Hay-Tuk-ba-ay the words the Hay-gan had waited so long to hear, but also this mission.

Hay-Tuk-ba-ay reached the forest that stood still and cool, and he scurried through brush and beneath the sweeping limbs like a chasing fox. Ahead lay the trail that the wolf-spirit had told him about. That trail would lead him to the southeast before turning slowly back to the west and to the place of the whitesand cliffs. Once there, he would climb those cliffs, follow them even farther west, and there fulfill his mission. Then hurry home.

Fulfill his mission, or die.

But before that, he must eat.

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