

The devil is real and he followed us. How can we stop him?

New Hope for The World

By Renee W. Peek

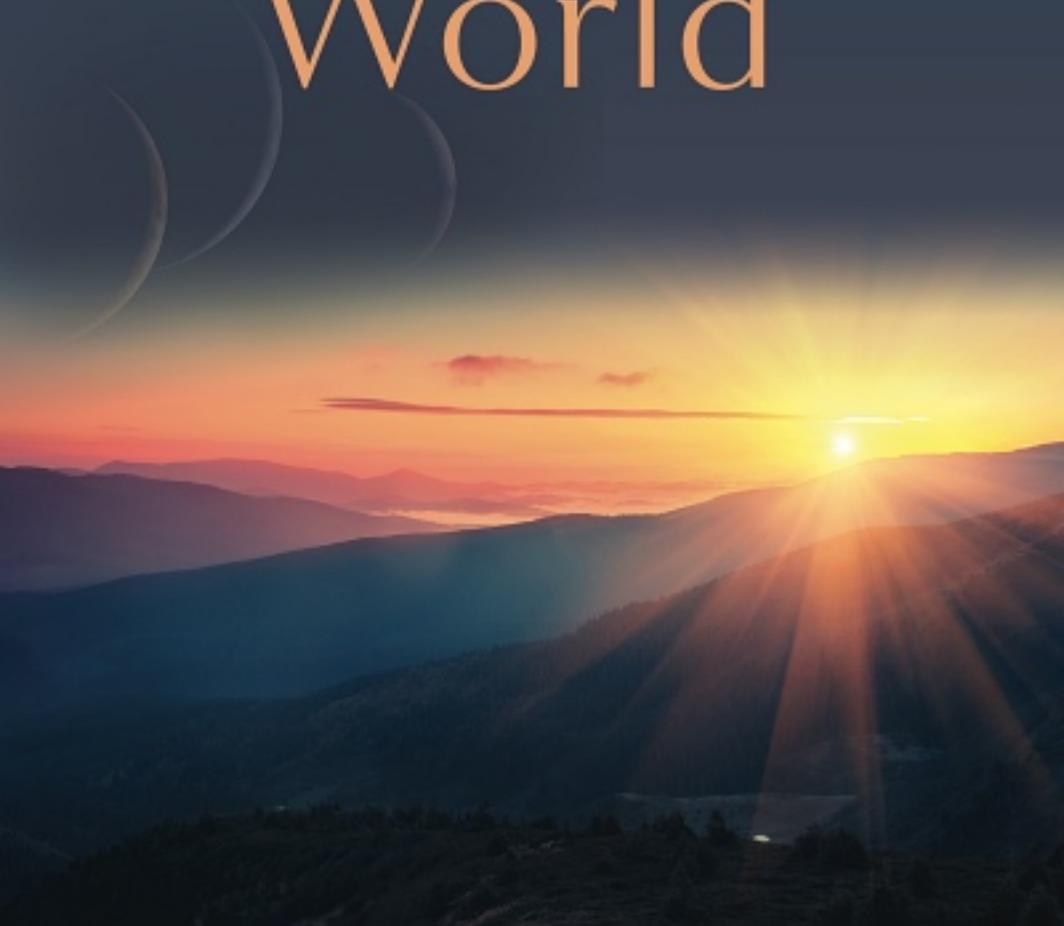
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Renee W Peek

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Chapter 1

Faxon stood on the massive rock overlooking the crystal-clear water below.

“Come on Madds, how can you pass this up?”

“You forget I’m from Minnesota, I am *very* aware of how water that was recently snow, feels.”

“We’ve been traveling for over a month to get here, and you don’t want to dive in?”

“Fly boy, you have to remember you’re all about the destination. I, am about the journey. Spending this time alone with you has been my joy.”

o o o o

Maddison has struggled with her recovery. The wound Gen inflicted on her was devastating, not just physically but emotionally as well. More than a month lying in bed, just standing up was an ordeal. During her extended recuperation, always reminded by everyone, she had to take things slowly or her heart may not be able to endure it. Months of being told to be careful, no stress, nothing physical or strenuous. Being treated as delicate and highly breakable took its toll. She was afraid to do anything, she was afraid to live.

Her friends tried to help, but any encounters were seen by Maddison as pity. She cut herself off from everyone, even her husband Faxon. Her days were spent in a chair by the lake, feeling sorry for the life she lost. She needed to be forced back

to herself, and there was only one power on this world able to do that.

Sitting in her chair wallowing in her self-imposed disability, she was unaware of her visitors. Seven people, all on horseback stood behind her for several minutes before announcing themselves.

“You need to come with us now.”

Maddison jumped, nearly falling from her chair. “Why would you startle me like that?”

An older Mi'kmaq woman, Isabella Tomah, dismounted with such ease, it looked like she floated down. She was not very tall, wearing well-worn clothing that cascaded like water as she moved. Her fluidic steps did not betray her age, long gray hair in an intricate braid down her back was the only indicator of her maturity.

“That was not my intention but an acceptable outcome. Your things have been packed, your horse is ready, you need to come.”

“I’m still very weak, I am not ready to take any kind of trip.”

“Maddison Bear’s Heart, I know you are not going to contradict the shamans. Neither are you going to make your elders wait, you have been taught better than that.”

Those words literally rendered Maddy speechless. Her desire to be left alone, was a far more recent behavior than a lifetime

of respect, esteem, reverence and more than a bit of fear of her elders. Maddison obeyed the directive.

She had not ridden her horse Stone since before her injury. He demonstrated his awareness of her trepidation as he kneeled for her to mount. Even with him easing her effort, she was breathless as she situated herself on his back.

Isabella approached her own horse, which was nearly half again as tall as Stone. The beast bent her front leg creating a step for Isabella to use to mount, again, she appeared to drift into position. With a wave she indicated for Zon to step forward. He had been patiently watching from the house.

Maddison was visibly perspiring and breathing heavily. She reached out a shaking hand to her husband. "Did you do this?"

His voice was subdued. "I asked them for help, so yes, I did."

"I don't know if I should scream at you or thank you."

"All I ask is that you keep the promise you made to me, what seems like ages ago."

"And what promise is that?"

"That you will always come back to me."

Maddison's words were solemn. "I don't think that woman is still here."

"That's why you have to go, to find her and bring her home."

The Shamans started off down the trail, Maddison followed without responding to Faxon. She couldn't, or she would have revealed she was crying. Wanting to be the woman she was, seemed impossible, and she could not hold Faxon to a bond with a shell of the person he fell in love with. This was her opportunity to free him from his commitment to her, and simply not return home.

But she did come home. Traveling to the place of power was a struggle beyond what she ever thought she could survive. The Shamans gave her strength and pushed her to be the person she was, allowing her to become the person she was meant to be.

It took many weeks for her to purge the fear, misery, gloom, and wretchedness. Those demons had woven themselves into her being, eradicating them took time and persistence. But Maddison did want to keep her promise to Faxon.

He in turn was preparing for her homecoming. They had talked often about taking a trip up into the hills. Maddy loved to make her way to the high places. He had llamas packed for the journey. He attempted to stand still while he waited but his feet had difficulty holding their place.

When she left, Stone and his wife plodded slowly away. Her return was a bit different. Maddison guided her beast at a full run down the trail. She could see Faxon standing in the same spot he was when she left. Bringing her horse up short he skidded, not quite to a stop, before she leapt off and into her husband's embrace.

They held each other so tightly it appeared they were trying to become one physically, as they were once again one heart, one soul, one mind and one hope.

When they finally released their embrace, Maddison saw all the packs. “Are you shipping me off then, Major Navarro?”

“Actually, I’m shipping us both off to the hills, and that lake fed from the snow on the peaks.”

Maddison was surprised. “Are you serious? Did you pack the warm clothes? Do you have enough food? Did you map out a route?”

“Now I’m sure you’re back to your old self, questioning everything I do.”

“It’s my job, and I take it very seriously. Did you let anyone know we’d be gone?”

Zon was proud of himself. “I told Jimmi, so that means I told everyone right?”

“Indeed.”

That’s what brought them to this moment at the lake.

o o o o

Faxon knew it was of no use to cajole his wife into the freezing water. He would have to use a tried-and-true technique, poke at her ego. “That’s fine, it’s probably too cold for a woman. As a strong military man, I will face this all on my own.”

“You’re just a petulant child, aren’t you? Fine I’ll do it, but first get undressed and find me a towel.”

“Way to kill the spontaneity.”

“Stop moaning and get naked man.”

They stood on the massive rock joined hands, and leaped in. As they plunged into the water, they were enveloped by the freezing liquid awakening every nerve in their skin. Bursting back to the surface, sounds they never knew they could make issued forth. When the initial shock passed, they could enjoy the experience, swimming around till numb digits forced them back to dry land.

Finding the horizontal rock face that still held the heat of the days sun, they laid their naked bodies out trying leach the warmth from the stone. Zon grabbed the towels, he covered Maddy and wrapped one around himself so he could run and get his clothes back on, then work at starting a fire near his shivering wife.

Maddison got dressed and found both of the llama fiber sweaters she had knit. Even with fire and thermal clothes it still took a few hours to get warm again, but it was worth it for both of them.

Maddison looked into the fire pushing the coals around with a stick. She spoke in a soft voice. “I know you know I was terrified of doing that. Even coming as far as I have, I still was afraid that shock would be too much for my heart. But you, my love, make me strong enough to do anything. Thank you for not giving up on me, even when I gave up on myself.”

o o o o

A leap into the freezing lake was a daily ritual for their stay. Faxon honed his routine. He had the fire set and lit it just before they entered the water. Keeping their clothes near the blaze made the reheating process faster and more efficient. After her dip, Maddy had taken to laying near the fire wrapped in a blanket watching the clouds roll by.

The purity and beauty of Adelphi surrounded them. Maddison let herself melt into the warm fur covering and take it all in. Suddenly that perfection was fractured, by a drone. It flew just above the trees, hovered over the lake for a few seconds and zoomed off. She could hardly believe her eyes, maybe she shouldn't. Where would a drone come from? Why would it be right there where she could see? She must have imagined it. Yeah, that's it, how crazy would that be?

Zon's voice brought her back. "Madds did you hear me?"

"Sorry I was somewhere else. What did you say?"

"I think we should start considering heading back, even with the fish and the things we've gathered, food is running low. It's also getting colder up here. I wouldn't mind feeling the warm breeze off our lake at home."

"I was pondering the same thing. And when we get home, we can start planning our next adventure."

"That's my girl."

Chapter 2

The trip back took half the time, less sightseeing, and they were both excited to get home again. Maddy kept an eye out for drones, still trying to convince herself that she could not possibly have seen one. But the notion was stuck in her head, and she was unable to shake it.

Faxon sensed something was occupying his wife's thoughts, but he was so happy to have her back that he turned a blind eye to anything that diminished his joy. That perhaps was not such a good idea.

Expecting an unceremonious return, to quietly unpack and collapse into their soft warm beds, was not to be. Trotting down the trail they saw a rather large welcoming committee, complete with cheering and applause. A quiet homecoming was out the window. But good friends were always welcome.

Everyone was there. Looking at them all, Maddy realized how long it had been since she'd seen them. Both Alexis and Greer had birthdays. They looked so grown up. Alexis was answering questions about animals people had seen, she was quite the expert now. Greer was spending time with a young man from Brazil, her parents were keeping a close eye on that.

Tam and Jimmi were as usual filled with smiles and stories. Jedda and Nikau were either showing off their daughter Hope, or chasing her down before she got into trouble. She was crawling at speed these days. Anna was speaking to one of the shamans. His name was Tangaroa, he was Māori. Maddy remembered him as one of those that took her to the sacred

place. He was rather forceful in his dealings with her. To be fair he needed to be.

Anna came over and gave Maddy a hug. “It looks like you had fun on your trip.”

“We did, we saw so many beautiful places, and the lake was as spectacular as I hoped.”

Tangaroa extended his hand. “It is good to see you again Maddison.”

“And you sir.”

Anna stepped back. “That’s a bit formal.”

Tangaroa offered a reason. “Ms. Bear’s Heart and I have a history. She may still see me as the evil bastard that harangued her relentlessly.”

That took Anna by surprise, “I’m sorry, evil bastard?”

Maddy cheerfully added. “That was my pet name for him.”

Tangaroa smiled. “Seriously, it’s good to see you surrounded by your friends again.”

“I have you and the others to thank for that.”

They were interrupted by Jimmi shouting for Anna, who offered an explanation. “I promised Jimmi I would do this, but Maddy I really want to catch up with you. I have so much to tell you.”

Anna ran up to the table they were using as a makeshift stage. Jimmi handed her a guitar and all eyes were on Anna. As she began to play, the crowd quieted. As she started to sing, Jimmi could not keep silent, in fact she shouted. "That is a song from my hero Jimi, I taught her that, for you Maddy!"

Anna's voice was clean and fresh, delightful to listen to, a gifted singer. All eyes were on her and of course Jimmi, who was performing her own style of dance, oblivious to anything but a song from her favorite singer. When Anna finished, the applause was emphatic. Being rather self-effacing, she stepped down quickly and made her way back to Tangaroa, who gave her a warm embrace and a long kiss.

Maddy touched Anna on the shoulder. "You *do* have a lot to tell me, don't you?"

Maddy made her way through the crowd to find Faxon. He was away from the party enjoying a fermented beverage with Sam and Daniel. He looked happy and content. Life was getting back to the way she always hoped it would be on this new world.

As the celebration wound down and the party goers started leaving, Tam built a fire by the lake for those who lingered. She and Jimmi settled in, as more drifted over. Anna and Alexis took their place in the circle. Andrea and Sophia made their way too, with Maddison to round out the group.

Watching a fire burn was mesmerizing. The embers seem to be alive, moving and breathing as the flames danced around them. In the darkness it gave a sense of unity to those encompassing the blaze.

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Maddison engaged the group. “There’s only one thing missing, a song. We all know you have it in you Anna.”

Alexis added on. “My mom was the singer in a band.”

Tam wasn’t surprised. “A voice like that could not have gone unnoticed. Did you write any songs?”

“I wrote a lot of our music. I was pretty good.”

Tam encouraged her. “Any that you’d like to share with us?”

“There is one that I sang often, called My Best Thing.”

Jimmy handed over a guitar. Anna began picking out a soft simple melody. A sweet rhythmic tune. Then she added her voice, a gentle hum lulling the circle into a calm. Smoothly transitioning to the lyrics, it was obviously a lullaby.

Following the traditions of mom and dad

That was not my way I needed to have my say so I ran away

I had to go off on my own for good or bad

Discover what was my best thing

Traveled the world sang songs with my mates

We saw beautiful places with new and different faces

Time was a blur didn’t pay attention to clocks or dates

Couldn’t find my best thing

I looked for my path, to find my road

Joined the fight for wrong or right

Being a soldier and a woman was a heavy load

Still not my best thing

*I committed my all, gave the world a whirl
At the end of my rope, I found hope
Entering this life my baby girl
She is my best thing*

That sweet child is my best thing.

As the last note drifted over the circle, Alexis let out a shocked sigh. “Mom, that was so sweet, thanks.”

Jimmi and Tam sitting on each side of the young woman both gave her a hug. Tam smiled. “My dear girl, I think you’re the only one of us gathered here, who didn’t see that one coming. Now get over there and give your mother a hug this instant.”

Alexis willingly complied. The circle was quiet for a few minutes as they all settled themselves again. Maddy was the one to break the silence. “Jimmi, I know you have your bag somewhere nearby with cups and wine, I think now would be a good time to break that out.”

Jimmi was more than happy to share her homemade spirits. She passed out the cups and started pouring the libation. Alexis reached out for her portion. Jimmi looked to Anna and got permission to include the girl. Once everyone was served Maddy stood up.

“I was going to offer a toast to a gathering of good friends. But I realized you are not good friends.”

Tam was not pleased. “Maddison?”

“No, you’re more than that, you’re my family. Thank you for your love when I was truly unlovable. You stuck by me when I didn’t deserve it. You kept hope alive. So, here’s to you, my dear family.”

She raised her glass as did the rest of the group. Each of them took a careful sip of Jimmi’s concoction, except Andrea. This did not go unnoticed. Tam was the one that called her out. “Andrea, is everything alright? You’ve never shied away from Jimmi wine before.”

“Sorry I can’t.”

Maddy picked up on that. “Can’t, you said can’t, not won’t. Andrea, are you?”

Andrea’s eyes sparkled. “Yes, I’m pregnant.”

The circle let loose with cheers and hugs. The emotional doors were open to a night of talking laughing and a few tears. Good friends reconnecting, reinforcing bonds, and reigniting the possibilities of life.

As the embers died out and eyelids grew heavy it was time to call it a night. Tam helped Jimmi up, and they made their way to find their horses. Their home was not far. Sam came to collect Andrea. He and Daniel had set tents up for those not wanting to travel so late. Anna and Alexis tried to find their tent for the night. Sophia helped Maddy make sure the fire was out.

She picked up a bucket and scooped water from the lake, as Maddy stirred the ashes. Satisfied things were safely extinguished they made their way toward the house.

Maddison's legs suddenly gave way. She was able to catch herself on a tree before she went down.

Sophia grabbed her arm. "That wasn't good, are you okay?"

Maddy tried to discount the stumble. "I'm fine, probably too much wine."

"You barely had a few sips, I saw you. You've been off since you got back. Is there anything I can help with?"

"No, no I just haven't been sleeping well. The whole trip back, it was a struggle. I've had strange dreams, frightening really, hard to sleep when you're scared to close your eyes."

"Maddy, you know I can help with things like that, I'm here for you."

She was grateful. "I know you can help. I think settling back in, having a routine is all I need. Life has been a bit of a whirlwind lately. A little calm will go a long way. Trust me, I'll call if I need help."

"I'll hold you to that Ms. Bear's Heart. Now, I need to find what tent my husband is in. Fortunately, I can identify his snoring at over fifty paces."

She gave Maddy a hug and disappeared into the dark, leaving Maddy to regret the lie she had just told her friend.

Chapter 3

Sam opened the door to let Sophia in, she was appalled at his appearance.

“You’re a mess, what happened? Is Andrea all right?”

“We’re fine, but she can’t stop crying.”

“Let me take a look at her, then I can see to your injuries.”

Sophia found Andrea sitting on the couch, legs folded under her covered with a blanket. Weeping uncontrollably, she was unable to even speak. Sophia sat next to her and took her hands. She was able to help Andrea relax, easing her muscles and diminish the emotions pouring out. The sobbing stopped, Andrea could breathe easier and come back to herself.

They sat for several minutes. When she fully relaxed, she unfolded herself and was able to speak. “I’m so sorry to bother you about this, I was frightened. Sam was bleeding so much, and I was no help.”

Sophia reached out again to calm her escalating friend. “It’s alright just start at the beginning.”

Andrea took a deep breath and released it slowly. “It’s all so silly. I invited Sean and Sarah over to tell them, Sean really, that I was pregnant. I thought he should know, and that he would be happy for me.”

“And he wasn’t?”

“Worse, he was really mean. When I told him, he said if it’s a girl will it be a freak like you? I wasn’t prepared for that at all. I mean who would be?”

“What happened then?”

“You know me I’m no shrinking violet, I went after him, verbally of course. But then Sarah got involved and she was a bit more physical. She went after me, so Sam pulled her off, and then Sean went after him. In the end Sarah and Sean really attacked Sam. They had him on the ground kicking and kicking. Sam stopped fighting back and they left. I helped him up and got the bleeding stopped, called you, and then started crying till you arrived.”

“The tears are understandable with the pregnancy, hormones and all. But that would’ve pushed any of us over the edge. Has Sean ever been vicious like that before?”

“God no, he’s always been so gentle, hated violence. But the guy I saw today didn’t seem like the man I knew. This world is not a good fit. He enjoyed money and power, we had that in abundance on earth. Living the good life for him was having the most expensive things and lording it over everyone else.”

Sophia could see the issues. “I would guess that Sarah’s having the same challenges and they’re encouraging each other’s bad tendencies. We can’t worry about them now, I am going to tend to Sam, you just stay right here.”

Sophia was able to reduce the severity of Sam’s injuries which were not minor. He had a concussion and several broken ribs. This was not a trivial altercation. She’d need to let others know

what had happened here. There has always been the concern about part of the population not wanting to be here. Their worry was justified.

o o o o

Tam struggled dragging the body up the beach. She called out to Jimmi for help. Her partner ran to her aid. Both of them grunted and groaned as they pulled the last one up to the dry sand, finally able to collapse into a sweaty exhausted heap themselves. As they lay there, Jimmi tried to catch her breath. “What the hell happened to them.”

Tam’s voice was shaking. “I’m terrified to even think it, much less say it out loud.”

Jimmi said what Tam couldn’t. “Have we brought some kind of disease with us?”

“I pray that’s not what’s going on here. Did you contact Alexis for me?”

“She and her mom are on their way.”

By the time their visitors arrived Tam and Jimmi had gotten themselves cleaned up. They erected a small tent to use for examining the bodies of various marine life Tam had found. She laid out the tools necessary for studying the remains.

Alexis immediately joined Tam in the tent while Jimmi took Anna up to the house, well out of visual range, to wait for the completion of the inspection.

They attempted to make small talk, but their worry about what was happening outside made that impossible.

Anna shared her concerns. “Alexis has been finding some very strange things as well. This is just more or less confirming her fears.”

“The same here, Tam was trying to brush off what she was seeing as natural occurrences. When that explanation no longer held, she called it an anomaly, a one off. Today she was beside herself, almost ranting that she should have done something sooner, and she would be to blame if this is a contagion of some kind.”

Anna was distressed. “I talked Alexis out of going to Jeddah. I thought she was making something out of nothing. I should never have doubted her or made her doubt herself.”

“This isn’t about blame, for you, or Tam, or anyone. This is about finding out what’s going on and fixing it, end of story. We need everyone on top of their game for this. Why don’t we fix supper? They’ll be hungry when they finish.”

Tam and Alexis washed up before coming in the house. A fresh pot of tea and two mugs were waiting on the table for them. Tam poured them each a cup and they went through to the patio, where Anna and Jimmi were anticipating their arrival.

Jimmi, never one to mince words asked, “Is it as bad as we all are thinking?”

Tam's exhaustion was adding to her sullen reply. "It is not good, not good at all. We have to get Ethan, Sophia, and Jedda involved, as soon as possible."

Even Alexis sounded somber. "Mom I think we should stay the night. I'll get up at sunrise, go back and gather my evidence. If you contact the others, Tam and I can meet them at the clinic. We need to do more testing to understand what we're dealing with, but there are just too many similarities on these bodies to the ones I've found. This is scary, super scary."

o o o o

Zon tried to calm his struggling wife. She was having another nightmare. Of late he battled with her almost nightly. In their bed he fought her, he had no idea who she was brawling with wherever she was in her dream. These events were taking a toll on him, but she was truly suffering. When she finally woke, they were both drenched in sweat and panting. Maddy realized it happened again and couldn't stop apologizing.

Faxon had to confront her. "Maddison this can't go on. Something is wrong and you need help. You have to call Sophia."

"No, absolutely not. I won't."

"After what happened yesterday? You think that was normal?"

"Please, give me a few more days, I know I can figure this out on my own."

"Madds, that's like saying I should let you hope a severed limb will heal itself."

“Zon, I can do this, please let me try. I’ve spent months under someone’s care. I just want to be well.”

He capitulated, mostly so they could attempt to get some sleep. Exhaustion was a powerful tool in cutting an argument short. His worry was not in any way diminished. The episode yesterday terrified him. They were both working in the garden. Without warning Maddison fell to her knees and appeared to be choking. When he went to her aid, he realized her gulping air resembled drowning.

She struggled to free herself from some invisible bonds. Each breath required great exertion. The sounds could only be that of someone gasping for air through some unseen liquid. The incident lasted for several minutes before she lost consciousness. It was an hour before she came to, immediately denying and diminishing the severity or seriousness of the event.

o o o o

Ethan was busy taking blood and tissue samples with Jedda’s assistance. Sophia was gathering information from both Tam and Alexis. The physical evidence they had was being kept as securely contained as possible, to keep it safe from contamination as well as keeping it from contaminating anything else. There were no protocols for such an event, they were creating new procedure here.

Sophia was trying to catch up. “How many days has this been going on?”

Tam was first to answer. "That's hard to say. The first body I found was one of the dolphin-otter crosses. He was dead maybe a week and I found him two weeks ago, he appeared to have drowned."

Alexis offered her information. "The first ones I found were not dead but seemed drugged. They were lethargic, uncoordinated, and highly agitated. It's all of the sosques that have been dead. The first one of those I found was also about three weeks ago."

Sophia was confused. "Sosques?"

"Sorry, that's what I call the little guys everybody else calls browns."

"Can I ask, why sosques?"

"Everyone uses their hides to make soft squares for blankets, soft squares, sosques."

Sophia smiled. "You should be in charge of naming things."

Ethan and Jedda joined them. Their demeanor was grim.

Alexis asked. "Well, what's the verdict."

Ethan was honest. "We just don't know. Tam you were right, all of those you brought in drowned. They showed signs of bruising or injury, and all had skin anomalies, maybe a lesion or two. There were unique abnormalities in their blood samples, but I have no controls to compare them to. The same

with Alexis's evidence. Strange blood irregularities, different from Tam's creatures, but still nothing to compare them to."

Tam was agitated, "So what does that mean, what can we do? Or more importantly did we do this?"

Ethan was resigned. "I just don't know."

o o o o

Maddy and Zon were pulling the canoe up onto the shore. They had been checking on the progress of the wild rice they planted. Their lake had a perfect environment for the seeds to flourish and they have. Their spirits were high, despite the troubles they were dealing with.

Maddison grabbed the paddles and headed to the house. "How about I make us some lunch and we can eat down by the lake?"

Zon was busy turning the canoe over and tying it up. "Are you sure you're up to that?"

When there was no response, he looked up and Maddy was on the ground. He ran to her side. She was struggling to get up. Her motions were clumsy, and she was agitated. She was trying to speak but her words were slurred. She fought his help crawling away and finally falling unconscious. He picked her up and brought her inside.

It was over two hours before she woke. Still uncoordinated and slurred she began to cry. Zon held her.

There was one positive outcome to this new scare, for the first time in weeks, she was able to sleep through the night. The

next morning at breakfast, she didn't mention what had happened the previous day, hoping it would just go away. It would not.

She and Zon were weeding the garden. Zon stood up and Maddy turned to see what he was looking at. Sophia and Daniel were walking toward them. She faced her husband. "What did you do?"

Sophia responded. "He did exactly what you promised me, you would do."

Maddison resisted. "No, I can't do this, I won't do this. I'm fine."

Sophia turned to Daniel and Faxon. "Leave me with her."

Sophia took the hoe from Maddy and got face to face with her friend. "Get over yourself Maddison Bear's Heart. There are bigger things going on here. I'm going to need you woman. Now let me help you, so you can help me."

That knocked her back. Maddison relaxed a bit and let her guard down. "You fight dirty. What's going on?"

"Not so fast, you first. Other terrors second."

Sophia led Maddison down to the lake. She pulled the chairs close, facing each other. "Now I need you to tell me everything, from the beginning."

Maddy took a breath but before she could utter a word, Sophia put her hand up. "From the *very* beginning, when you and Faxon were at the lake."

Maddison just stared at her wide eyed.

“Don’t look so shocked woman, I *know* you. Because of your injury we have joined for healing a multitude of times, we are part of each other. Don’t hold anything back or I’ll know.”

“That’s kind of frightening, but understandable. You’re right, it did start at the lake. I saw, or I imagined I saw, a drone. It was just for a few seconds, but the image hasn’t left me since that moment. And I guess that started the nightmares too.”

“You said they frightened you. What are they about?”

“A ship, a huge ship, twice the size of the Fitzgerald. It was filled with machines and weapons and...”

“And what Maddy?”

“Death.”

“What do you mean, death?”

Maddison needed a minute to respond. “That’s the overwhelming sensation for the entire dream. That the ship was here to kill her.”

“Who?”

“Her, I don’t know, just her.”

Sophia stood up and called out for Daniel and Faxon. They came running. “Faxon you need to get Tam and Jimmi here as fast as you can.”

He reached for his comm, but Sophia stopped him. “Put that away! Absolutely no comms. You’ll have to go and get them. Daniel you have to tell Ethan, Jedda, Anna and Alexis, to stop using comms and to talk to no one about their concerns.”

Both men just stared at her.

Sophia’s impatience was visible. “If you’re waiting for an explanation, that’s not happening. Just go, do what you’re told.”

Her voice held a tone they knew better than to cross. Both men ran to their horses.

Maddy’s tension was certainly not eased by any of this. “Can I ask what’s going on?”

“Sorry, explaining things to them would just take too long. Your story has eased one of my fears and opened a whole new set. But before I share any more with you, I have to hear your tale in its entirety, please. Zon said there have been strange episodes. Strange how?”

Maddy was hesitant but trusted Sophia. “Two of them, in the first one I felt like I was drowning. Being restrained, held down and water filling my lungs.”

Sophia interjected. “And the second? Like you were drugged?”

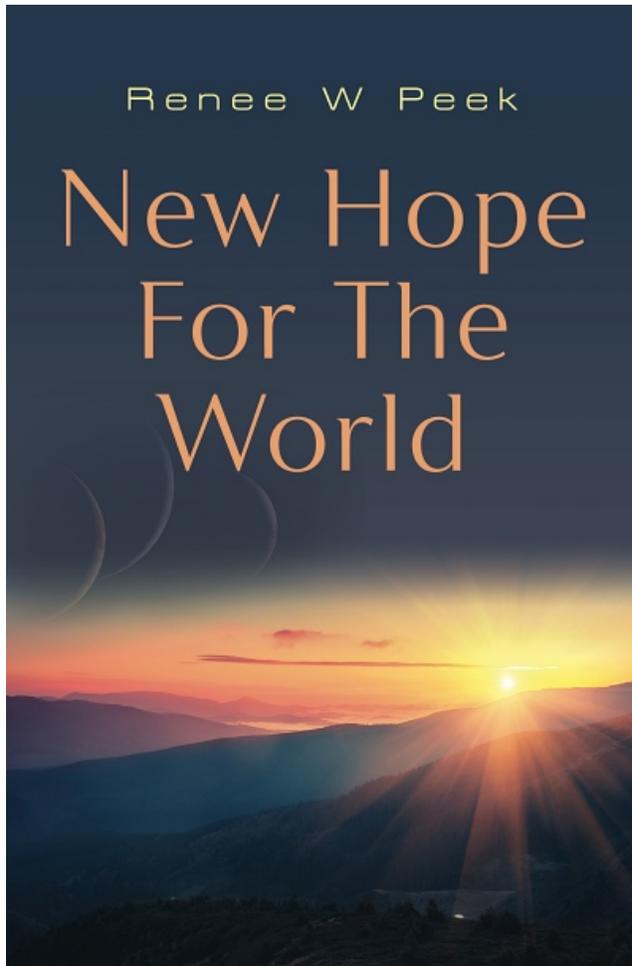
Maddy’s jaw dropped, “How could you possibly know that?”

“It’s coming from Adelphi, or maybe just the animals. I can’t really explain that, or why she hasn’t spoken about this to

Andrea or Greer. All of that is still confusing. What is clear, is that you're her voice in this, and she's frightened."

Maddison was trying to keep up. "How do you know all this?"

"It's what I alluded to before, there's been much going on that you need to hear. Tam and Alexis have been dealing with animals dying for no reason. They each were fretting separately, that we somehow brought a disease with us. Just days ago, we gathered the information together. Ethan performed all manner of tests and could neither confirm, nor deny, the hypothesis. With what I've learned from you, I'm sure we didn't do this directly. But I fear we played a part, a big part."



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