

Prologue:

She was born a stranger in her own den, an alien to her own kin. In the depths of the earth, sheltered from the cold March winds, the girl huddled alongside her vixen mother, an inexplicable hybrid of man and beast. Where her five siblings clambered atop one another with tiny paws, she was born clenching fists; where they were foxes through and through, she possessed the torso, chubby arms, and dexterous hands of a human being.

On the day of their birth, both the girl and her siblings were small enough to fit in a human palm, barely six inches long, none heavier than a hundred grams. Stubby two-inch tails flicked against one another as they clung to their mother to endure the cold darkness, their brown fur making them resemble moles more than foxes. In a weeks' time, their coats had grown thick enough to sustain themselves away from the vixen, but this growing independence brought with it new dangers.

Born blind and deaf, the six offspring first came to know the world through touch, taste, and most importantly smell: the cool, dead earthen walls, the soothing safety of mother's comforting musk, and the tantalizing glimpses of a wider existence beyond. By the second week of their lives, as the first rustlings entered their newly opened ears, and the first flickers of light trickled into the eyes in the darkness of the den, the five foxes found themselves much smaller than their hybrid sister.

The first sight her developing brain truly registered came in her third week, when upon waking she found her only sister smothered beneath her rapidly growing body. The girl felt neither sorrow nor fear at spotting the carcass, not even recognizing the sibling who had been—the corpse was merely another facet of her environment, no different than the soil beneath her padded fingers or the scat marking the entrance to her families' earth. The girl sometimes tried to crawl toward the light she saw there but she remained too feeble. It was only the previous week that her upper teeth broke through her gums, and another few days had passed before her lower teeth followed. Instead, she merely mouthed and sucked at her dead sister, either to develop jaw strength or to occupy herself as she waited for her mother to arrive back from getting a drink.

When the vixen returned, the girl abandoned the corpse to suckle from her mother's milk rather than her sister's juices. She was so large by now that her mother needed to stand to accommodate her. Even for a nursing vixen, she was abnormally thin, given how many calories went into feeding the ravenous girl. The fur pulled off by the girl's hands revealed that the vixen's bones were visible through her flesh. The black tips of her ears sagged with weariness and her thin brush, from which clumps of fur had also been pulled, added to her skeletal features. Even the vixen's mask, once as red as harvest leaves, now appeared sunken like the eyes of a corpse.

Despite the vixen's eight hairless teats, the girl could not feed alongside all the others without risk of smothering them. When the girl was feeding alone, one or two others might be able to fit, but they would try to drink from the higher quality teats near the vixen's groin, which the girl coveted as they aided in her growth. She always fought to suckle first, leaving the other kits reluctant to risk squeezing their way in as well.

Hunger finally goaded the bravest kit into joining the girl as she advanced toward their mother. He stole ahead, but as he opened his mouth to take hold of one of the vixen's teats, the girl crashed into him, sending the pup sprawling. With her awkward proportions, the girl's tackle finished as a tumble, though fortunately for her sibling he avoided being crushed. Undeterred, the male kit staggered upright and wobbled back towards the vixen, only to receive a vicious bite on

the foreleg from his hybrid sister. As she turned back to feed, her brother was left shrieking on the floor of the den.

Though the girl's milk teeth had not yet fully developed, they proved devastating in the skirmishes that erupted among her siblings. Already, two of her more delicate brothers had perished after daring to challenge her, their remains quickly devoured by their mother. The vixen took little interest in such conflicts, devoted to protecting her brood from outside threats rather than internal competition, content to feed whoever managed to get to her first, or ever. Such was the way of the wild: the weak would perish, while the strong would not suffer on account of nutrients being squandered on their less-endowed kin. Should worse come to worst, the vixen would live on to reproduce again; a motherless kit had no chance of furthering the species.

She had reared two litters in this manner, albeit both of them consisting entirely of normal kits. For these reasons, the vixen allowed the girl to monopolize her milk even as her other young stagnated. Where the girl's coat had blossomed into a beautiful chocolate brown as she doubled in size and weight, her siblings' woolly fur remained darker as they lingered in her shadow. Nonetheless, their azure eyes had opened much like hers, and their previously pink noses had likewise turned black, even as they stumbled about in the darkness on unsteady, malnourished limbs.

At nineteen inches long, the girl now rivaled her mother in size. Her balance was even more rickety than that of her siblings due to her oversized cranium and generally awkward proportions. It was a chore simply lifting her head to suckle. But even after doing so, the girl had exhausted neither herself nor her desire for attention. With no regard to the weak cries of her hungry siblings, she nuzzled against her mother's neck and licked the corners of the vixen's mouth. This caused the vixen to regurgitate scraps of meat which immediately caught the girl's attention. She abandoned her attempts to cuddle her mother in favor of taking these new items in her jaws. Lacking the tooth morphology and jaw strength to down even half-digested meat, the girl was only able to suck at the scraps and play with them.

One might be forgiven for initially humanizing the vixen by believing that she had intentionally distracted the girl with these toys. In theory, it would give the others an opportunity to suckle. Yet the first thing the vixen did was walk over to the corpse of the girl's dead sister and devour it. Only afterwards did she allow her other children near enough to feed. They did so eagerly as their brother's cries steadily weakened until death finally claimed him.

After they finished suckling, the two surviving kits stumbled toward the scraps of meat that the girl guarded over, regarding them with curiosity. Covetous even of uneatable loot, the girl raised her back and let out fierce "*gek-gek-gek*" clicking sound to warn them off. The bolder of the two backed away but kept an eye on the girl, watching for when she might lose interest in the scraps. After a few minutes, he turned his attention to his brother's corpse and attempted to worry it with his lacteal teeth, managing to suck a few juices as the girl had from their sister's body.

Crying in fear, the other kit retreated to their mother's side where he curled up next to her and whimpered for attention. The vixen licked behind his ears then rolled him onto his back to do the same to his genitalia. The kits were unable to void their own bowels until they reached two weeks old, requiring the vixen to lick their groin and rectal areas to stimulate this response, just as licking the corners of the vixen's mouth caused her to vomit. Otherwise, the accumulating waste would have killed them, and to the vixen, their deaths were only acceptable if they were at each other's hands. Though her children should have been able to urinate and defecate on their own at three weeks old, they were either not developed enough or simply reluctant to do so. After the kit voided his bowels, she consumed his waste pellets to prevent the spread of disease.

The kit pawed at his mother's snout, and the vixen nosed him back, the two falling into a familiar game. Taking note of their play, the bolder kit ceased worrying the bone that had occupied him and staggered over to join them. This drew the girl's eye as she chewed on her own scraps. At first she relaxed, contented that her possessions were safe, but at the sight of the others mingling, a flame of jealousy erupted within her heart, setting the fur along her back to bristling. As the meekest of the two kits mouthed at one of their mother's teats, the girl abandoned her vigil and leapt to pull her brother away, grasping his legs with hands that, although padded and furred, were distinctly human.

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Gabriel stood ankle-deep in the snow, grasping a struggling snowshoe hare in his hairy, padded hands. As he twisted with practiced care, the snap of its spine was lost beneath the creature's screams. The hare continued to shriek long after the deed was done—much to his relief. He needed it alive. As much as he would have loved to devour the fleshy little beast now, Gabriel's first priority was to rid his newly claimed domain of competition.

That thought brought to mind the musky odor that had set this plan in motion. Gabriel had recently made camp in a nearby glade, and while marking the surrounding territory, had found the stink of fox hanging thickly in this stretch of woodland. But now, clutching the maimed hare, he had a means to address that problem.

Keeping his face to the wind as he stalked through the trees, Gabriel followed the vulpine musk as it swirled on the evening breeze, twisting the hare's leg once more to ensure it played its part.

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Waning sunlight bled through the pine trees, etching the silhouette of a hungry dog fox as he passed by a woodchuck's winter burrow. He glided gracefully over the snow as he searched for a specific scent he'd lost, swaying his head from side to side and holding his tail close to the ground. That brush was bereft of a white tip, and as though nature sought to appease him, the dog instead had a silver splotch on his back. The splotch grew visible as the dog fox left the cover of pine and neared a stream, which glistened in what little light remained in the flame red sky.

This was the father of the girl. Aside from the silver blotch, his bright orange fur was healthier than his mate's, and brighter too, approaching a yellowish-brown. Yet his form was more haggard than even that of the vixen, slimmed by weeks of frugal eating to concentrate on hunting for her. With previous litters, he would return with rations every four or six hours, but in order to make up for the increased milk production required to suckle the girl, the vixen needed to eat every hour or two. By their second week, each kit required eight-hundred milliliters of milk per day, but even with all the extra hunting, the dog fox could not make up for the deficit in their milk supply left by the girl, who required an average of two quarts per day.

The dog fox had no way of knowing about this situation, as the vixen refused him access to his young, but she harassed him for increased supplies. Therefore, he dropped even more food outside the earth without questioning the matter. While foxes have diverse diets—perhaps more than any other canid—the dog focused on supplying his vixen with the most abundant prey, such as deer mice and meadow voles. Ever the opportunist, he would also return with carrion, such as the occasional fawn who had starved over the winter. On days when pickings were slim, the dog would bring her short-tailed shrews he caught alongside the thawing marshes, even though both he and his mate disliked the smell. Normally, both would sooner play with shrews than eat them. The dog especially liked to toss a shrew back to its burrow in anticipation of capturing it again, seldom

bothering to make the kill. Even now the dog never ate the shrews himself. On the other hand, the vixen grabbed them brusquely, desperate to replace her depleting calories. Eager to accept whatever she was given, her meals also included star-nosed moles, and when the dog was feeling more generous, flying squirrels. Despite that, it was also not unheard of for the dog to expel energy taking on more difficult prey, sometimes just for himself. These included birds—ring-necked pheasants, grouse, and wild turkeys—as well as his favorite meal, hares.

The latter was on the menu tonight. The dog craned his neck to face the icy breeze, as though willing it to carry the succulent stench of leproid. The weather gradually warming now that April had arrived, nevertheless, the generally colder environment of Northwestern Ontario made for fewer smells. The ones that did appear travelled shorter distances, though this had the benefit of making it easier to focus on specific lines, which were denser and thus closer to the ground.

That was why he hadn't given up on the snowshoe hare, knowing that if he caught its scent even briefly, then it must be nearby. Constant hunting had taken its toll on him. In order to continue hunting for his family, he knew he must eat, and heartily. The initial whiff of hare tempted him yet the breeze failed to reignite the trail and no sights or sounds revealed further clues. The dog fox decided he was too weak to waste more time. Even if he found its trail again, the hare would prove difficult to pursue. He knew he should focus on something he could catch without exerting much energy. His eyes darted towards the northeast as he visualized a ghostly ring two meters ahead of him, ready to line it up with any rustling he heard. His ears rotated, listening in all directions while he continued inhaling the breeze, hoping to soak in that familiar scent just in case. It was his ears that detected the sound first. The dog turned, feeling the wind on his back as he angled his ears away from the breeze and toward the raspy cry of a snowshoe hare in distress.

To human eyes, the sky would have been red. To Gabriel it was a dark yellow. The mustard tone contrasted sharply against the bone-white snow, allowing him to see sharply even though it was dusk. Granted, in complete darkness he would see nothing, and at the best of times, he had difficulty making out details. Nonetheless, he discerned contrast far easier than any human could, and at this time of evening, his yellow-blue-grey vision drained ever closer to black-and-white, making it all the easier to spot anything moving along the snow. Especially when these distinct shapes were in motion, as the dog fox running toward him was.

Gabriel remained still so the dog didn't register his presence until he was within a few meters. That's when he cast aside the crippled hare and lunged forward, falling to all fours in the process. The dog fox tore back the way he came. Slowed by his abrupt turn, Gabriel caught up to the dog fox easily and didn't even need to slash at the dog with his fangs or bite at his hock joint. Instead, snow flew as Gabriel tackled the dog fox, seizing him not in his jaws, but with his hands. Hackles rising, the dog fox dug his fangs into Gabriel's left arm. Streaks of blood flashed like lightning over the white shrouding the earth. With his left hand, Gabriel grasped the dog fox by the skin of his neck, ignoring the pain as he pulled him loose. With his right hand, he seized the dog fox's abdomen.

"Food belong Gabe-ree-el! No take! Bad! *BAD!*" he wretched, his voice a breathless cough.

Gabriel released the dog fox's abdomen as he rose to his hind legs, allowing the struggling creature to dangle midair by the scruff.

"You no belong," continued Gabriel, his lolling tongue slurring every syllable that escaped from his constantly gaping jaw. "This place for Gabe-ree-el!"

As the dog dangled, Gabriel's fingers pressed against the nerves in his neck. Muscles relaxing, the dog fox hung limp. Gabriel paused, wondering if the creature may be confused by memories of being carried this way as a kit. He considered a time when his victim was small and innocent. For a fleeting moment, he even wondered if there was another way.

Instinct took over as Gabriel's rapier-sharp fangs plunged into the flesh between the dog's ears and jaw, rupturing his larynx as his windpipe was crushed.

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Back within the earth, the vixen grew thirsty and left to get a drink. Some lakes remained frozen but the ditches were full of water. Along the way, the vixen heard the water flowing high through her favorite brook as she drew nearer. As if to replace the frozen ice, the vixen froze in her tracks upon finding her dead mate at her feet. Curious imprints surrounded his body. They were deeply imprinted in the melting snow, which had been little more than sludge when they were made and were just starting to freeze. Each track sunk deep into the slush and held scent well, which the vixen did not recognize, but understood was that of an enemy. From the enemy's scent, she could also tell he was healthy and eating well. Paradoxically, he smelt high-strung and depressed; as though some recent trauma tormented him.

Every muscle tense, the vixen nevertheless lifted her head. She cocked her ears and focused her eyes, vigilant for the slightest movement as she continued assessing the situation. The ground was fiercely scratched near stones and trees where the aroma of the enemy's scat and urine lay fresh. From the smell, the vixen learned that the enemy had only just set up his range that evening, for there was only one recent coating of urine.

The elevation of the enemy's scent marks on the trees both impressed and terrified the vixen. Being nearsighted, it was from those scent posts rather his tracks that she could tell he was nearly double the size of any canine she had ever encountered. If the vixen were human, she would have wondered what bothered him and why his he was so large; why he left only two tracks rather than four. Yet as a wild animal, she questioned this no more than she questioned giving birth to the girl. Back straight and brush raised, the vixen bolted through a thicket she had chosen for these circumstances long ago. With her departure, the final embers of sunlight died, leaving the landscape shrouded in night's embrace.

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Gabriel sat at his recently set-up camp site, located in a glade amidst an otherwise heavily wooded area. After spending a time learning the land to determine where the eatable vegetation and prey were located, he felt satisfied that he'd finally found a suitable home and had scent marked the area that evening. The trees here made for excellent cover and he could use the elevated land to spot danger coming. A little way out of the glade there was even a plateau overlooking a lake from a steep, rocky slope. The towering cliffs provided nesting for various birds, like the herring gulls who shrieked incessantly when Gabriel first arrived to scope out the area. Their cries pleased him, as he knew they were in the middle of mating season. He was confident that their eggs would provide many meals once May arrived.

The only resource competition seemed to be foxes. He'd already dealt with the male, meaning the battle was half won. So for now, he was happy to be treating himself to the snowshoe hare from earlier. Gabriel had gotten a fire going and used a spit to cook the recently deceased leporid over its flames. If he had the facial muscles for it, he would have grinned in gratitude that no scavengers had beaten him to retrieving his meal. He doubted that he could get another hare

quickly or easily, as even on all fours, he was not swift enough to catch the creatures in a straightforward chase.

Gabriel was too exhausted to rely on either cunning or chance, but at the same time, was equally tired of mice or whatever he could scavenge. If anything, he wanted to try his luck with large prey when he had the energy for it. A deer, perhaps? But without deeper snow to hinder them, Gabriel had little hope of bringing one down alone, not without a good deal of luck. He had from time to time been the first scavenger to stumble upon a fresh corpse, and had even found bucks tangled in branches by their own antlers, leaving them defenseless. But to hunt and fell a healthy, able deer was another matter entirely. And even if God saw fit to provide him with a deer, Gabriel wondered if he would be forced to consume it raw. Having recently taken to cooking his meals, he had little desire to return to his more savage past. But did he have suitable tools? Reflecting upon this, he turned to his backpack and rummaged through the supplies he had acquired the night his imprisonment had ended.

Beyond the rucksack lay a large, freshly dug pit, containing a post with a short length of rope dangling from it. Closer still lay a smaller hole, one that would have resembled a food cache were it not occupied solely by a few scraps of clothing. The rags, worn and faded, were all that remained of the toddler; by now they had even lost her scent, leaving Gabriel with only memories.

The child had passed in December, but he had kept her corpse long afterwards, doing his best to protect her from scavengers and the ravages of nature. At first, he had gone as far as to bring her with him on his hunts, carrying her in his jaws as he would a pup, though this quickly proved unfeasible. On days when quarry had been scarce, Gabriel had even grappled with the idea of devouring her himself, though for all the screaming of his primal instincts, he had never given in.

And on frigid winter nights, as he sat otherwise alone before the fire, Gabriel had been thankful for his restraint, thankful for even that little bit of company. Only when the stench of decomposition had grown too strong to ignore did he resort to burying her in the cold earth, thus preserving both her and his fantasies of fatherhood. After a completed hunt, he would leave her a leg, a whisper words of kindness to the soil. Even in death, she would be cared for. He could not remember his own upbringing, but assumed it could not have been far off.

But for all his efforts, a part of Gabriel had always known that he could never protect what remained of the girl forever. And though he had spent long hours between hunts debating how to properly dispose of the remains, in the end the wolves had decided for him. After his efforts to join the pack were violently rebuffed, and he risked his life to retrieve the scraps of clothing, Gabriel had set out in search of a safer domain, promising to himself and her that he would bury her clothing somewhere in remembrance.

This sentimentality was what had prompted Gabriel to snatch the child off a rock the prior November—but despite his efforts to care for her, he had still failed. She had still died. Even now, he cursed himself for his weakness. As his mind wandered through the lonely, painful past, he wondered why the children he captured never survived, be they humans or beasts. If only he could discover what had gone wrong, perhaps the next would live. But the causes seemed different every time: hunger, sickness, the cold, predators. No matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried, there was always another danger he hadn't considered.

When Gabriel dwelled on it long enough, he could almost see her skull grinning back at him. Was she angry, or happy? Surely she could not fault him for trying? As if in answer, the wind changed course, and he turned to see branches overlapping against the moon. In them, Gabriel glimpsed a grinning skull—and as he regarded the sign, a new scent washed over him on the nightly breeze. Nostrils quivering, he identified the aroma: a vixen.

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The girl heard her mother arriving at the earth's entrance and stumbled forward to meet her. She wondered if perhaps the vixen returned with a new toy, but the vixen's demeanor was anything but playful. She held her head low and her ears flat while her back was arched. The girl hesitated, having never seen her mother behaving this way before. The vixen let out a bark ordering her children to her side. The girl understood what the call meant, and as the earth was congesting with the vixen's fear scent, she also understood why. In spite of these instincts, the girl remained still.

The girl's two surviving brothers reacted differently. They dashed to their mother's side as they cried and soiled the earth. Upon smelling her brothers' fear as well, the girl wet herself and let out a warbling whine but continued refusing to approach her mother. The vixen ignored her sons and leapt to the girl's side, attempting to lift her in her jaws. Given the girl's advanced size and weight, the vixen couldn't do it and dropped her twice. On the third attempt, the vixen grew careless. Instead of holding the girl gently with her molars, she let her canines close slightly too much. Not enough to seriously injure the girl, but enough to make her cry out in pain.

The vixen loosened her grip and stood stiff and erect. She didn't drop the girl this time but she couldn't lift her again either. She simply held the girl in her jaws the way she would drag a beaver carcass. After attempting to take a step or two back with the girl in tow, the vixen dropped her intentionally. Jaws free, the vixen headed to the earth's entrance and crouched down to meet noses with her sons as they sniffed at her. The vixen knew they weren't as strong as the girl, and ordinarily, that would mean they were less likely to survive. Nonetheless, the reality that this was a special circumstance had finally asserted itself to her. The vixen picked up one of her sons with her molars and dashed off.

The girl and her remaining brother stared out the earth's entrance in bewilderment. Not knowing if they'd ever see their mother again, they both forgot their rivalry and drew close for comfort. Once the smells and sounds outside the earth had been so intriguing. So much so that their mother often had to carry them back into the earth when they tried to wobble out to investigate. Now the girl and her brother cowered at each new sound, curled their tails at each new aroma.

Then a familiar smell returned. A bark followed.

It was mother!

The girl wobbled outside the earth to greet her, chirping out a "wow-wow-wow" care call. Mother followed up her bark with a soft mew. Both the girl and her brother recognized that mother was calling to him, not her. The girl froze. Mother never chose the others over her—never! Before she had time to fully process this information, the vixen scooped up her brother in her jaws and dashed off with him. This time, the girl let out a series rhythmic, warbling yelps, calling to her mother as she pathetically attempted to follow. Due to her unsteady hind legs, she just couldn't keep up.

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Gabriel loathed to walk on all fours like some kind of animal. He only did so instinctively to pick up speed or to disable quarry and it was necessary for tracking as well. Down he went to sniff at puddles of melting snow that the vixen may have stepped through. He also stuck his snout between tree roots and other hollowed-out areas, for they often trapped scents. Yet he still couldn't find the vixen's line again. He even tried the foliage, but as the greenery had not yet returned and dead leaves held no scent, he knew that was useless. Gabriel wondered why he was having such

difficulty. Then he remembered the whiffs of fear in the vixen when the wind first blew her trail to him. Based on personal experiences, Gabriel believed a fox's fear odor could reverse course when they were afraid enough, becoming almost undetectable.

Restless, Gabriel pushed himself up onto his hind legs and peered through a covert. Past it, he observed moonlight washing across the uneven terrain. Gabriel watched it as he stopped to think. Then something appeared. Gabriel couldn't believe it. A vixen dashed by, illuminated so clearly in the moonlight that she manifested as a glowing specter. The wind was in Gabriel's favor and her scent revealed that she was the same vixen he had tracked earlier. Stunned at his good fortune, Gabriel offered the Lord a silent prayer of thanks. Then after making sure that the wind continued blowing in his face and away from the vixen, Gabriel stalked her from a distance. He thought he saw her carrying something in her mouth. As anything that wasn't large and close by tended to disappear into a blur, he didn't realize it was a kit until he sniffed the air more critically.

Gabriel got closer and crouched low in a thicket near a marsh. The vixen approached the reeds along the coastline, not detecting Gabriel even though he was only a few feet away. The thicket obscured him and he remained completely still, preventing his body heat from spreading his smell while the wind continued blowing it away.

A pathetic cry echoed from the reeds and another baby fox tumbled out from amongst them. The vixen dropped the kit she was carrying, and from her smell, Gabriel could tell this made her even more high-strung. Instead of picking up the kit she had dropped, she brusquely snatched up the one who had run to her, then tossed it into the reeds. Even before he smelled death on the air, Gabriel's ears picked up the sound of the kit's tiny vertebrae as it was severed. Three smells wisped through Gabriel's mind. A crib; a baby; a (*mama*) woman. Gabriel advanced toward the vixen. He did not fall to all fours nor quicken his pace. He walked toward her slowly, as that was what his anger demanded of him. It wasn't fiery wrath nor a raging squall. His anger manifested as a winter frost, icing over the landscape of his heart and killing anything there that lived with each successive step.

The vixen turned when she heard the first rustle from the thicket and lifted her head to see Gabriel's clawed hands reaching for her. She would have bolted to lead him away from the kit cringing behind her but there was no time for that. The vixen met Gabriel with raised hackles and aggressive cackling. She leapt around with her body held low, snapping from any angle that Gabriel might consider using to get around her, not that he was interested in that. He paid no attention to her fangs as they pieced his flesh, not even when he knelt down to meet her and she bit his face, taking a firm hold of his snout. Without flinching, Gabriel grasped the vixen's neck. He made it a point to strangle her with his hands rather than compress her windpipe with his jaws. The vixen tore at his snout, and as though he couldn't feel the pain, Gabriel tore her away, leaving scars that would last a lifetime. Even then, he did not flinch or scream. But he did speak as he glanced over to the reeds where one of her kits lay dead.

"*Bad!*" barked Gabriel, gagging out each individual syllable. "Bad mama! *Bad! Bad! BAD!*"

He listened to the suffocating vixen as she tried to get another hold of him with her jaws, but it was useless. Still, she did not hang limply as her mate had done but writhed around defiantly. A warrior to the end.

When she was dead, Gabriel turned his attention to surviving fox kit. Unable to flee as he was underfed and smaller than he should be—to say nothing of his wobbly hind legs—Gabriel grabbed him easily. For a moment, he hesitated. Then he reminded himself that unlike the baby humans and prey animals he had tried to foster, this creature would grow up to be resource competition. Hands trembling, Gabriel snapped the kit's neck to kill him as quickly as possible.

Gabriel didn't like scavenging infants. Not even ones he had to kill. So, he held each kit in a separate hand and walked back in the direction their mother had departed from, resolving to bury them in their earth. He paused when a series of warbling cries echoed through his wide, erect ears. He followed the skirl until he found something small and furry fumbling about near the earth he sought. Gabriel lifted the screeching thing up by one of its hind legs and examined it. Superficially, it resembled the fox kits but was closer in size to the vixen. Except the chubby little thing had hands, which despite being furred and padded, were also round and sausage-like... the hands of a human baby.

As though he was trying to smile, Gabriel forced open his jaws as wide as he could. This wasn't resource competition; this is a creature like *him*. Like—

“Like Gabriel!” he cried, his every ivory fang gleaming in the moonlight.

Chapter One Summary:

Calvin McGimsie chambered a round in his rifle and trudged to the door. “I’m hunting wolf,” he grumbled, back to his wife. “We could use the bounty.” He couldn’t bring himself to look Ruth in the eye. With the coming of dawn, he ought to have been helping her maintain the farm. But even worse, she knew better.

“You’re going to look for her again,” Ruth muttered, her voice weary and plaintive.

Samara. It had been seven months—seven months since their daughter had vanished. Seven months of Hell. Seven months of combing the woods with search parties, probing every hollow and streambed, watching as one by one, his neighbors had given her up for lost, blaming wolves, or worse. While Calvin had insisted they search farther, the others had only dared to retrace his own steps, and even then reluctantly. When they thought he couldn’t hear—and sometimes when he clearly could—they whispered of legendary beasts, lurkers in the woods. A witch the Ojibwe still feared. If it wasn’t for her, or her kin, how far could a childlike Samara have gotten?

A child like Samara, he reflected.

They could have said the same of any toddler, but considering Samara’s condition the idea was particularly asinine. Even from birth, she had proved troublesome to care for, delivered with great difficulty by a local midwife who, controversially among her people, had been trained as a physician. Ruth had asked for her daughter’s life to be prioritized over her own, and a cesarean had been required to save both mother and child, albeit barely.

But even after birth, Samara developed at a snail’s pace, suffering from low bone mineral density and poor muscle tone. With slanted eyes, a short neck, and a bulging tongue, one could hardly look at the girl without being reminded of her fragility. And yet, she had survived. After months of fear that God would claim their ailing daughter, Calvin and Ruth had been convinced the girl’s survival was a miracle. They had chosen her name because it meant—

“—protected by God,” whispered Calvin. “That’s how I know she’s still out there. God wouldn’t let anything happen to her.”

“God would know when to give up,” Ruth snapped.

Rage, a rare emotion for Calvin, boiled within his breast, to the point he felt his own skin might blister. But they had done this before. Had lived with this for seven months. Keeping his feet planted, Calvin forced himself to breathe out as he continued checking his gear, all the while repeating the prayer that had become his mantra: *I’m never giving up on this family*. As he took comfort in the well-trodden words, his eyes went to the crudely carved Madonna by the door, and the rosary dangling below it.

They had come here to escape the sinfulness of the east, the worldliness of the cities his own parents had been raised in. Northwestern Ontario, and Blackbird Peak in particular, had seemed ideal in that regard: a community of fellow Catholics to rely on, secluded even within the frontier of the Canadian Shield. Located northeast of Port Arthur and enclosed by vast boreal forest, the small town had previously been inhabited by Ojibwe natives, though the Jesuits had brought religion—as well as English and French. By now the white settlers outnumbered the Ojibwe, though as most of the latter had been converted, there was little cause for tension. The inhabitants of Blackbird Peak enjoyed a simple, peaceful life: of boating and fishing, church picnics and holiday barn dances, skiing, dogsledding and ice-skating. While modern technology was available, most of the inhabitants chose not to rely on it, and avoided dealing with outsiders when able.

Given the barren mountains and marshy lowlands, the chief forms of employment here were logging, flour milling and mining—though in spite of the difficulty of farming on the Canadian Shield, a small agricultural industry had also sprung up in recent years. Having experience in the latter, the McGimsies had used their savings to purchase land and cultivate a farm on the outskirts of town, in the shadow of the woods.

Calvin had chosen the site on account of his passion for hunting: he could arise shortly before daybreak, take a few steps out the door, and find himself in the forest. But few others dared to build where he had. Many Ojibwe legends had survived the Jesuits' conversion, myths that had found a home in the settler's folktales. And though the natives' youngest children were now sent away to residential schools, forbidden from learning their people's history and culture, the tales had a way of enduring: ghosts and sasquatches, the underwater Mishipeshu, an alluring deer woman and forest-stalking windigo. Above all else, the Ojibwe feared a witch, seldom referred to by name even by most adults, but known as Myeengun.

Calvin never paid heed to such pagan superstition, and given the confused accounts and lack of evidence, neither did his wife, though she remained more prone to listening whenever the fearful whispers began. Instead, Ruth saved her scorn for the more rational doubters, those who scoffed at the McGimsies attempts to start a farm in the boggy soil of Blackbird Peak, with the short growing season and inhospitable climate. For that reason, the two had also set to raising poultry, hogs, and even a dairy cow, but their few acres of land continued to produce vegetables as well as wheat and barley.

The two were just about ready to clear another few acres of swampland when Ruth had been incapacitated by the growing complications of her pregnancy. As the weeks stretched, Calvin had found himself growing more and more despondent with fear for his wife and child—and his one respite from it all, hunting, had likewise been taken from him. Even after Samara's birth, Ruth's health had wavered, often doubling her husband's workload, leaving him little time for anything save monotonous, exhausting farm work from dawn to dusk.

When Ruth had fallen ill once more last November, growing so sick she couldn't even care for Samara, Calvin had decided to bring their daughter along on his woodland forays, the only time he felt alive anymore. Ruth had urged him against it. Calvin's reply had been simple. "If you can't look after her, she comes along with me."

With the girl tucked in a warm trapper pack, he would hike along in the peaceful quiet of early morning, and while a part of him regretted that he was not lying in wait alone with a rifle in his grip, another part reminded him to be thankful for small blessings. There were enough things to be miserable about in the world anyway, and Samara seemed perfectly contented. She seemed perfectly safe.

How could he have known differently?

It had happened late in the month, on a crisp, cold morning. Having come to a clearing near an Overlook, Calvin had set Samara aside on a rock to retrieve a small meal for the two from his pack—but as he rummaged for the foodstuffs, his eyes had been drawn to movement below. Mouth agape, he watched as a moose browsed in the underbrush, oblivious to his presence. Studying its tines glinting in the early morning light, Calvin’s heart was filled with awe, and beneath that envy. He found himself wishing he was alone, and equipped with a rifle. That thought prompted him to turn back to his daughter, but when he did, she was gone.

He found no tracks over the rugged rocky ground, nor signs of a struggle. Heart hammering, his thoughts growing increasingly frantic, Calvin had circled the area as a light rain began to descend. This soon rose to a torrent, the waters washing away any clues that might have remained, just as the howling winds drowned his desperate cries.

The rational among his neighbors had blamed an eagle or a wolf. The Ojibwe had offered a different explanation, whispering of the witch of the woods. Calvin had heeded neither. He continued to venture deeper into the forest, even as his wife abandoned hope. He blamed himself, and suspected deep in his heart that she did too. With that weighing on his heart, he couldn’t give up.

After a month had passed, Ruth had insisted he stop trying to find a girl who was obviously dead by now. Calvin, for reasons unknown even to him, had shifted to giving the excuse of collecting wolf bounties for his expeditions. Perhaps it was easier for both of them. Whenever Calvin wished to confront his wife, to beg her to refuse to give up, to apologize for his failure, the words wouldn’t form properly.

They never did. And so today, as before, the two faced each other in icy silence. Hefting his rifle, Calvin slipped out the door, a passage from the Book of Jonah flashing through his mind. The thought prompted him to leave his wife with a final, hushed comment.

“God doesn’t give up on anyone.”

As Calvin slipped by, brown runoff soaked into soils on clay deposits, then drained into treed bowl bogs and peat margin swamps. The night itself was likewise draining into an orange dawn, providing enough light to guide him through the uplands and lowlands of the terrain. It was underlaid with bedrock and coated with defrosting snow that somehow found its way into his leather boots as he trod between the roots of pine trees and stepped over ferns. Nonetheless, conditions remained somewhat wintry, and from what Calvin could see as he passed by, a still lake remained frozen.

Overhead, stars remained visible in the sky, through which only a little wind whispered and which bequeathed no sound. When he passed a bare rock outcrop, he felt his soul laid just as bare. Ruth was right. Samara was surely dead by now; he would only start healing once he accepted it. Calvin considered giving up his quest. Then he remembered how Samara would grab his thumb while he bathed her in the kitchen sink as a newborn, her slanted eyes peering up into his. The memory seemed to manifest itself as a physical force, like some invisible hand—or indeed, God Himself—pushing him on deeper into the woods. With each step, the sunshine lighting Calvin’s way crept steadily through the sky and over the landscape, until only a few fading stars remained overhead. Just as they were the only sign night had recently passed, the ephemeral tracks he came across was the only sign animals had been by. Upon noticing the tracks, Calvin reluctantly stopped to examine them. Following a halfhearted first glance, Calvin thought may be wolf tracks. To appease Ruth, he decided he should probably follow them if indeed they were. After all, Calvin

did occasionally return with a wolf pelt so he could at least keep up the pretense that he was out collecting bounties.

When Calvin knelt down to examine the imprints in the snow, it was immediately clear these were not wolf tracks though it still took him a moment to determine these were the slim signature of a coyote. A rare sight in Blackbird Peak, as the species had only migrated to the area a decade or two ago. Calvin himself had never encountered any coyotes in Canada and only recognized the tracks based on experiences he had in the United States. Curiously however, there was only one pair of prints. Oval-shaped with four clawed toes and a wide lobe on the triangular back pad, Calvin recognized them as hind feet. Was the animal walking upright? He'd once heard of a dog missing its front legs whose owners had trained it to do just that. But a wild creature? Absurd. The tracks were also too large. Calvin wondered if he misjudged the tracks, as he was certainly no coyote expert. Or perhaps they deteriorated? He looked again. No, they were barely an hour old and although the ground was little more than sludge, they were too clear to leave any doubt.

Calvin looked ahead and saw these uncanny tracks led into a glade; its contents obscured by the skeletal branches of the mountain-ash trees that surrounded it. The sun was on the horizon now and it was blood red. As the beams bled between the branches, Calvin drew back, thinking it made them look like the fences constructed from child bones that marked the homes of European *witches* in stories he had heard as a child.

With his rifle raised, Calvin entered the glade. Inside, he was surprised to find a crude, barebones campsite. Initially, he thought this must be the dwelling place of a hermit, although the animal tracks, scat, and urine and everywhere were odd. Calvin was also confused to see a hole amongst the snow that looked to have been scooped out by a canine muzzle then partially covered with dirt and leaves. Peeking out from beneath the dirt and leaves were the traces of Samara's torn clothing. In panic, Calvin dug up the hole but found nothing else buried. Calvin tore around the campsite, wondering if Samara—or *her remains; no, not her remains; please God, not*—were about.

This led Calvin to a pit where two button eyes peered up at him from a woolly mass of chocolate-brown fur. If not for the red patches around its low-set ears and the white tip of its tail, Calvin may have thought the eyes belonged to a bear cub. But no, this was clearly a fox kit. Yet...yet it looked as large as a human baby? Creeping closer, Calvin saw that between the stumpy hind legs and round head of a three-week-old fox was the torso of an infant; furred yet human.

The fox-thing's hands clutched at empty air, seemingly reaching out for help. It was tied to a post by its neck, starving and covered with parasites. For a moment, Calvin wondered if the fox-thing had anything to do with what happened to his daughter. As if in response, its blunt muzzle opened and let out a pathetic, warbling whine.

Heart swelling with pity, Calvin dismissed the idea and set aside his rifle to free the fox-thing. He picked it up without being bitten, theorizing it must be because it was too weak to protest, though a part of him wondered if perhaps it (*needed?*) trusted him. Calvin examined the fox-thing for a few disbelieving moments, wondering if perhaps he had made some kind of mistake. His examination led him to uncover her genitalia. This was not a fox-thing but a fox-*girl*. Calvin felt compelled to stare into her oval eyes, which at closer range, he could tell were blue. He considered how her vertical pupils make them seem slanted. Typically, an animal would regard locking eyes as a threat, but the fox-girl stared back. His wife rehabilitated orphaned animals when she was younger, but Calvin himself didn't have much experience with foxes—not even with hunting them—and even less with fox-girls. Regardless, this one held his gaze acceptingly, even serenely. A rush of emotion welled up in Calvin, overwhelming yet calming.

Snapping twigs and heavy footfalls appeared behind Calvin. He turned to see a creature, roughly five-feet-tall, returning to the campsite the same way he had entered it himself. Despite having the tail and digitigrade legs and feet of a coyote, the creature walked bipedally. Human testes hung visibly between his legs and he also had the wiry arms and torso of a teenage boy. Yet he was covered in fur, grew claws in the place of fingernails, and from the neck up, looked exactly like a coyote.

The creature struggled to carry the scavenged remains of a white tail doe over his shoulder as he sniffed at the air, regarding Calvin with disbelief. Panicked, Calvin fumbled for his gun doing his best to avoid dropping the fox-girl. The sudden startled the creature and he cast aside the doe and stepped forward.

“THAT BELONG GABE-REE-EL!” screamed the creature, his voice somewhere between a retching cough and a yipping howl.

Calvin abandoned the gun to sprint forward with the fox-girl cradled in his arms as the creature fell to all fours to give chase. This loping monster would have caught him in seconds had the man not run from the glade to a rocky plateau overlooking a lake. Hidden by the brush surrounding the glade, Calvin didn't see it at first and nearly dashed over its edge. At the last moment, he veered out of the way just as the creature barreled toward him. The creature ran too quickly to change course himself and tumbled over the edge, leaving Calvin to presume his demise.

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Calvin returned home with the fox-girl wrapped up in his jacket as he clutched her to his chest like a human infant. He explained what happened to a confused Ruth as she tried to get a better look at his cargo. Calvin was certain the coyote creature killed and possibly ate Samara, as he found her torn clothing buried at the campsite. Despite the slight credence she gave to the tales of creatures in the woods, Ruth had a hard time believing Calvin's story. She only accepted it once he allowed her a clear look at the woolly bundle in his arms.

Calvin wanted to take care of the fox-girl but Ruth felt concerned that she was one of the monsters of legend, although she heard of nothing quite like this. Calvin disagreed, seeing the fox-girl as a helpless child. This caused Ruth to suspect that Calvin considered her a replacement for Samara. Calvin denied that, but Ruth bitterly remarked that Calvin could help the fox-girl if he liked but she wanted no part in it.

Alone, Calvin bathed the fox-girl in the sink to remove the parasites, taking especially long to pull the ticks from between her hand and feet pads. When she was clean, Calvin dried the fox-girl, wrapped her in a blanket, and took her to sit by the fireplace while she stared into Calvin's eyes. Calvin stroked the side of her muzzle as the fox-girl gently grasped his thumb with her jaws and held the rest of his hand with her two tiny human ones.

Calvin scratched behind her ears. A grin flickered across his face at the lamb-like texture of her fur but vanished as he considered how malnourished she was. He wondered what to feed her when Ruth arrived with a bottle full of goat's milk, expressing guilt that she was initially so inhospitable to such a helpless creature. Calvin thanked Ruth, and bottle fed the eager little fox-girl. She nuzzled her nose against Calvin when she finished, clearly wanting a cuddle. Calvin encouraged this.

“Samara,” he whispered.

Ruth, passive until she heard that name, snatched the fox-girl away from Calvin and covered her eyes “so she doesn't get used to us.”

When Calvin asked why, Ruth replied that if the town finds out about the fox-girl, they'd consider her to be one of the legendary monsters.

“They’ll think she’s dangerous and might hurt her,” explained Ruth. “The plan should be to rehabilitate her, then release her into the wild. If anyone asks, for now we’ll say we’re hand-rearing an orphaned animal.”

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Regardless of the fact she couldn’t understand them, it was clear to the girl that the man and the woman were arguing about her. Sometimes, they argued in front of her. Other times, her keen ears picked up their words from afar. She responded more to the emotion in their voices than anything else and could detect the slightest trace of aggression in their speech. It made her start yelping until they finally stopped to give her attention.

From the man’s actions soothing voice, she could tell that he wanted to protect her. Likewise, the girl could tell from the harsher tone in the woman’s voice that she wanted her gone. It frightened her yet made her desire the woman’s approval all the more. When the woman was close by, the girl sought to appeal to her with nuzzles and “wow-wow-wow” care calls. No matter what, she couldn’t coax even a little love from the woman, so instead, she focused on getting cuddles from the man. He would only provide affection when the woman was not looking, but as he had to feed the girl constantly while the woman concentrated on farm work, he had plenty of time each day to shower her with love.

Thanks to the constant feeding, the girl’s development advanced. Within a week, her beautiful blue eyes turned a stunning amber. Around this time, the girl also began parroting some individual words the man said, coughing out syllables between what he described as “a kind of clicking sound.” Her speech was slurred as the girl needed to let her mouth hang open to speak and the meaning of the words remained lost on her. They were usually single-syllables and too disconnected from one another to carry any real meaning.

The girl’s muzzle elongated and turned silvery white as additional red patches appear in her woolly brown fur which took on a beautiful luster. The man added raw chicken and boiled eggs to her diet and in under two months, the girl no longer needed to be bottle fed as her clumsy body elongated into a form of gaunt, sinuous grace. The girl’s spine lengthened and her legs grew tall as her tail developed into a big, fluffy brush with a creamy tip. By July, she had most of her adult teeth and her clumsy blundering became light-footed leaping, even though she continued walking on all fours like a fox.

When the woman was not around, the man started adding new words to his vocabulary, referring to himself as “daddy” and to the woman as “mommy.” Each night, the man also rocked the girl to sleep, whispering “Samara...” as they locked eyes. Then one morning, something unusual occurred.

“Sam-me! Sam-me!” the fox-girl defiantly shrieked. Beforehand, she spoke on a completely rudimentary level. Only now did she rasp out the words “Sam” and “me” in such a way that indicated she recognized this as her name. Given the shape of her mouth, the fox-girl let her jaw hang open when she spoke, relying on the unusual physiology of her tongue (and presumably her unseen larynx and vocal cords) to form words.

When Ruth challenged her adoption of this name, Calvin immediately referred to the fox-girl as “Sammy” instead of Samara. They compromised by naming her Samantha despite mainly referring to her as Sammy. For the first week of September, “Sam-me!” or “Sammy!” was all Samantha really said, although an understanding of a few other basic words began popping up in her vocabulary. Still, the words she did understand were commands that a pet would recognize

such as “bad” or “stay” rather than anything that indicated human intelligence, and even then, she rarely responded to commands or came when called.

That week, Samantha grew more rambunctious and started digging holes indoors, Calvin let her outside early each morning. He hoped it would help her expel energy without being seen by the rare passersby. An unlikely event, but still a bigger risk later in the day.

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The growing season was coming to a close, and to Calvin, more than that was ending. He sipped his coffee as he watched Samantha through the window. By now, she weighed ten pounds and measured thirty-three inches long with an additional sixteen for her tail. Her thick coat was a glossy, gold-tinted red while her humanoid chest and belly were a greyish white. Dark fur covered the tips of her vulpine ears and lower legs, as well as her otherwise distinctly human (though clawed and padded) hands. It rose up her human forearms as well, like she was wearing long velvet gloves. Save for her tongue her humanoid upper torso, she largely resembled an adult fox in both size and appearance.

The snow still likely wouldn't fall until October, leaving Samantha with a lovely autumn environment to play in. The fox-girl took advantage of it by digging holes around the farm, something Ruth disliked but tolerated until they found a better solution than letting her dig inside. Despite being a farmer himself, Calvin simply smiled, knowing Samantha was in search of delicious insects to supplement the meals she received from them. She had also been teaching herself to hunt and was successful at least once, as Calvin learned when he came across an uneaten grouse buried in the garden. Samantha rarely ate her prey and it was always buried haphazardly, though whether that was out of inexperience or laziness, Calvin couldn't say. As livestock was expensive, Calvin just felt grateful that Samantha hadn't gone after any of the farm animals, generally contenting herself with worms, slugs and beetles when she wanted to procure a snack without sneaking into the cupboard.

Upon finishing his drink, Calvin went outside to keep a closer watch on her. With a flick of her ears upon hearing the door open, the fox-girl rolled her amber eyes toward him, meeting Calvin's gaze for just a moment before returning to her digging. Calvin was hurt, feeling his little fox-girl had been losing interest in him. She rarely approached unless he had food and now wouldn't come when called *at all*. This week, he had stopped tempting her with treats and simply watched from nearby, hoping she would approach him on her own. Feeling particularly disturbed about it that day, Calvin advanced a few feet, then stopped as Samantha turned to look at him again. After a momentary pause, she trotted up to Calvin, sniffing at his hands in the hope that he was hiding a treat. Finding none, she ceased sniffing. Calvin expected her to return to her digging, but instead, the fox-girl perked her ears as she craned her head up to him, mouth gaping wide. The ends of her mouth were sloped upward as though she were perpetually smiling. Calvin can't help but grin at that.

“Hello Sammy,” whispered Calvin, followed by a low chuckle.

“Sam-me! Sam-me! *YIIII!*” screamed the fox-girl as she stood up on her hind legs, grabbing the ends of Calvin's shirt to maintain her balance. The fur around her neck swelled in excitement, highlighting her triangular face and pointy snout. Calvin laughed and gently scratched beneath the silvery white fur under her chin.

“That you are honey,” he sighed. “That you are.”

Samantha leaned into Calvin's hand, letting out a contented purr. Normally that would make Calvin happy, but today he felt a twinge of sadness. Just how much longer would she be responsive

to his caress? When would she want to return to the woods? In a month? A week? If he encountered her there, would she go wild; revert to fearing him as ordinary foxes did? Or would she still love her daddy; love him forever like a good human girl?

“You... you love your daddy, don’t—don’t you Sammy?” choked Calvin, his voice trembling.

He stopped scratching her as he said that, knowing he would never live this down if Ruth or— heaven forbid—the other men in town could hear him. Samantha paused a moment, not sure if her pampering was complete. Finally, she released her hold on Calvin’s shirt and plummeted back down to all fours, before prancing back to her hole to dig some more.

A cold sensation passed through Calvin, approaching—but not equaling—the sense of loss he experienced when Samara disappeared. The panic that accompanied it did not return however. Instead, Calvin turned away to walk indoors, dejected but ready to accept—

“Heh-lo dah-dee,” said the fox-girl.

Calvin turned back to see Samantha sitting a few feet away and staring at him. Calvin grinned and knelt down with his arms open wide. Samantha bound to him, chattering in a way that resembled laughter, and leapt into his embrace. Smelling the relief within him, Samantha snuggled close to Calvin, rubbing her nose against his face.

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Calvin couldn’t get Samantha to call him “dah-dee” in front of his wife, and accordingly, Ruth insisted that he misheard her say “Sam-me.” Nonetheless, Calvin made it clear to Ruth that as far as he was concerned, the relationship between him and the fox-girl had been established. Calvin had accepted Samantha as his daughter and Samantha had accepted him as her father.

Ruth felt that idea was very wrongheaded, for her experience with the fox-girl had proven very different. If anything, she found that Samantha became more animalistic as she matured. This was at best exasperating to Ruth and at worst terrifying for her. Samantha was nocturnal and got easily agitated during the late hours. She crawled on the furniture, inadvertently knocking things over and keeping Ruth up all night. Samantha also chewed up clothing and ruined the house by digging holes in the floor. Allowing her to dig holes outside each morning helped matters, but it wasn’t good for the ground and they were steadily approaching the first winter frost.

When Ruth put food in her dish, Samantha would only eat some of it and hide the rest of it around the house. This led to Ruth hand feeding her small pieces of food, although Samantha would still run off and hide them under the rug or between pillows. Frustrated, Ruth advocated for keeping Samantha outside instead of just letting her out early each morning. Calvin disagreed, protesting that it was dangerous, especially at night. Ruth said that it’s natural for a fox to be up at night and Samantha seemed to be getting independent enough to be released anyway. If they let her out more, maybe she would even return to the wild on her own. Calvin challenged this idea, but Ruth countered by pointing out that they had agreed to release her into the wild anyway.

“Wasn’t that what you wanted?” asked Ruth. “Or has ‘daddy’ changed his mind?”

“Alright,” grunted Calvin. “You can put her out each night. But only so as long as I supervise her until she’s ready to come in for bed.”

This worked at first but soon things were just as bad during the day. Samantha defecated and marked her scent all over the house, leaving it stained. While she had human hands, they were still clawed and padded, as were her vulpine feet. The scent glands between these pads gave her a nasty odor. Disgusted and horrified, now Ruth wanted Samantha kept outside throughout the day as well. Their farm was somewhat isolated even within the community because it was adjacent to the woods so Ruth insisted that it was unlikely other people would see her.

Unconvinced, Calvin attempted to descent Samantha. When that failed, he tried litter training her but she didn't understand. Exasperated, Calvin put down urine mats everywhere after unsuccessfully arguing with Samantha to get her to use the toilet. This amused Ruth, who felt Calvin was finally getting a taste of what she had to deal with, instead of the "loving little girl" whom he claimed called him "dada" and "dah-dee."

When he was not working, Calvin spent most of his time cleaning up after Samantha. Ruth refused if he insisted on keeping her inside during the day. Eventually, it got to the point where between farming and looking after Samantha, Calvin was exhausted. He needed a break, and one night, he reluctantly agreed to let Samantha out alone while he went to bed early. As she finally had some free time herself, Ruth decided to catch up with a book she had neglected since Samantha came into the family.

As she read, Ruth overheard a frenzy of screams and clucks from outside. She alerted Calvin and the two headed outside to investigate. A hole has been dug under a weakness in the fencing surrounding their henhouse. Inside, they found twenty-eight hens dead with their heads bitten off. The twenty-ninth hid in a tree she escaped into, quivering in terror. Nearby, scrape marks surrounded the loose soil where Samantha partially buried the thirtieth hen, decapitated yet quivering.

Scenting Calvin and Ruth on the air, Samantha whipped around and ran to them, holding her body low and lashing her tail rapidly. Between excited whimpers and yaps, she choked out her first full sentences.

"*Kak-kak-kak!* Sammy get food!" she gagged. "*Kak-kak-kak!* All by self! Kill all! Eat one tonight! More for later!"

At first, Ruth failed to notice Samantha's newfound eloquence. Instead, she shouted at her about how much money she'd cost them. Ruth would argue with Samantha but she had never raised her voice to the fox-girl; not in all the time they spent together nor after any of the mischief she caused. By that point however, she had reached her limit. The rage shocked Samantha and she curled her tail underneath her body while flattening her ears against her head.

"Mama *mad?*" she whimpered, lowering herself to the ground and resting her chin on the backs of her velvet hands.

This was the first time Samantha ever called Ruth "mama." She gawked for a moment, finally realizing that the fox-girl was truly speaking.

"No, I'm... I'm not mad..." she finally stammered.

Encouraged, Samantha rolled over onto her back, holding her mouth agape as she whined and wiggled at Ruth's feet.

Heart melting, Ruth scooped Samantha up and tried to wipe the dirt and blood from her. Samantha made it difficult because she lowered her head as she narrowed her eyes to avoid Ruth's gaze. Cradling Samantha in her arms, Ruth walked back indoors as she reassured the fox-girl in a gentle tone.

"I'm not mad," Ruth soothed. "But we need to find a way to deal with, with..."

Ruth waved her hand, gesturing back to the mayhem.

"...with *this.*"

.....

Inside, Ruth sat Samantha down at the kitchen table and had a talk with her. Samantha referred to herself in the third-person as "Sammy" and spoke in short, clipped sentences. Her speech remained slurred and guttural as her mouth hung open to cough out words but she expressed herself

rationally. Ruth bit her lower lip, noting that in some ways, Samantha was more developed than human children her age. The girl had not yet reached her first year, yet here she was, holding a well-reasoned conversation.

Ruth paused to think a little more. “Samantha, answer this honestly,” she finally said. “Do you want to stay with me and Cal—with ‘dada...’ or do you think you’d be happier on your own?”

“What—*kak*—on own?” asked the fox-girl.

“You know, living by yourself, in the wood—”

Samantha shrieked in anguish and leapt into Ruth’s arms. There, she hugged Ruth as tightly as any human girl would at the prospect of being sent away from her mother.

Ruth concluded that this was the reaction of a toddler, not an animal.

“Don’t worry Samantha,” said Ruth. “You can stay with us. But only on the condition that you learn to behave yourself.”

“Sammy will!” coughed the fox-girl. “Sammy promise!”

Chapter Two Summary:

Samantha looked out the kitchen window while she waited for Ruth and Calvin—her “mama and dada”—to return home from an important meeting, after which they said they’d need to have “a talk” with her. To pass the time, Samantha watched as the barnyard slowly succumbed to shadow. She did not see the red and oranges in the sky, nor in the autumn leaves of the maples in the forest. Instead, they appeared to her as a muted yellow while the balsam firs registered as almost completely white. The girl’s world was a pastel painting of limited detail, where anything that wasn’t close by appeared blurry. Yet it was also a place where the general shapes of those hazy objects did not disappear in darkness. The contrasts between the pasture, forest, and fencing sharpened as the yellow-blue blackness of dusk dissolved into a crisp, greyscale night.

As the yellow drained from the sky, Samantha considered her status within the family. Surely “the talk” must be something to do with the fact that she was different, which she first realized because she could hear and smell things that were impossible for her parents. Early on, it was overwhelming, and as taste and scent are linked, she would often “smell” things by handling them with her mouth. Since learning that was “bad,” Samantha made sure to only use her mouth to grip the toys that her parents brought so she had something to chew and pounce on. Otherwise, she handled things with her hands and used her nose to recognize important scents or tastes.

Though Samantha mainly navigated with her ears and could distinguish between night and day by the amount of colour she saw, she initially relied on smell to tell the precise time. It was easiest to smell early in the morning, for the sun burned up many scents as the day progressed.

By the fifteenth of September, Samantha had also experienced her first winter frost. It trapped the scents in the ground initially, but allowed the smell to rise gradually. Accordingly, smells were not as strong at night, but Samantha could catch whiffs blown about in the night air. This included the well-rotted manure that mama had left to mix deep into the ground to ensure the best planting conditions for June. Ruth had pulled the crops right on time but has been so distracted with Samantha that she had only just applied the manure at the last minute. Snow had yet to fall despite the onset of October, allowing Samantha to enjoy the scent as it entered through the kitchen window.

The smell of manure led her gaze across the barnyard, where her vertically slit pupils settled with machine-like precision on a dog fox as he moved horizontally towards the stalls. Having recently dispersed, the youngster was now trying to find his own range and some easy meals. To

that end, he attempted to uncover some kind of opening in the barn's stone walls, where Calvin and Ruth relocated the surviving hen as well as a few replacements. Despite the added care necessary to keep poultry dust from mixing with the other animals, Ruth and Calvin felt this was the right call, as it kept temptation away from Samantha.

The dog fox eventually gave up and began sniffing at the various spots where Samantha had scent marked. She never stopped watching him but when he suddenly went still, it appeared to her that he had vanished. She relied more on her ears and nose to navigate through her environment and recognize its inhabitants. Her eyes were for avoiding obstacles and spotting movement, and even then, they were aided by her ears. Samantha concentrated until a shadowy ring formed in the northeast, which helped her focus her eyes on the precise location of the dog fox when she heard him edging closer to the farmhouse. Samantha saw him sniffing at all the places she's scent marked until he arrived at a stack of timbers next to a maple tree adjacent to the house, around which some kind of structure was being built. Samantha had sharp vision at close range, and recognized herself in the dog fox's contours. Upon breathing in his scent, she intuited that he was a male. Samantha opened her mouth to make a contact call, when she saw the fox digging up a grouse she buried by the tree.

Samantha flattened her ears and instead let out an aggressive "*gek-gek-gek!*" Convinced the vixen's mate must be on the prowl, the dog fox disappeared into the forest as a full moon rose over the treetops, his frantic speed startling crows far above him into taking flight. Samantha caught only a glimpse of a slim black shape, left to wonder at what it was.

In the gathering dusk her eyes could only register significant movement, and even during the day she had trouble making out distant shapes, as well as detail. She had first become aware of her unusual way of seeing the world when Ruth had tried teaching her to read, beginning with the Bible Samantha had grown so accustomed to hearing from. Samantha could not make out the words. That didn't bother her much at first, as her mother continued reading to her aloud instead. It only began to affect her when Calvin brought her home picture book called *The Frog Prince*. Samantha enjoyed the story, and Calvin used the frog's transformation to teach her the difference between humans and animals. However, Samantha was very upset to find that she could not make out the beautiful drawings her father described, which appeared to her as smudges. This was one the first time Samantha found being different to be a problem and she began crying, which for her, more closely resembled a "*wow-woooow-woooow!*" scream.

To console her daughter, Ruth decided to give her a special present. She went up to the bedroom she shared with Calvin—in which Samantha was not allowed—then came down with a beautiful porcelain doll, sporting real human hair and a lovely smelling dress. Samantha recognized the scent as wool because that's what her mother wore when she left for church. Ruth held the doll out to Samantha. Back raised and hairs bristling, Samantha started gekkering as she prepared to pounce on it like her other toys.

"This is *special* toy," said Ruth, lifting the doll just out of reach. "You have to learn to play with it *respectfully*." Ruth explained the doll represents a "human girl," and that her mother gave to her when she was little, now she wanted Samantha to play with it as she had. Ruth rocked the doll in her arms like a baby, showing Samantha how it's done.

"Sammy want play!" the girl chattered excitedly, running back-and-forth and thrashing her tail.

"Can I trust you to try playing with it *respectfully*?" asked Ruth

Samantha thought for a moment, then agreed. "Yes!" she barked. "*Kak!* Sammy good! Sammy good!"

Samantha sat down and rocked the doll in her arms. Instead of tasting it or smelling it, she felt its infant-like features with her hands. The fur growing on and between her hand pads was highly sensitive and revealed even more to Samantha about the doll's features than her eyes did at such close range. While Samantha stroked its long, silky hair, the urge to chew it and toss it around faded. A feeling of calm settled within the girl as she looked up at her mama.

"Human-*kak*-girl!" declared Samantha. She lifting the doll up to Ruth who grinned as Samantha raised her hand to feel her own face too. "Human gir—"

Samantha fell silent, her sentence unfinished. Instead of the smooth porcelain features of the doll, she felt her hairy, pointed snout. For a fretful moment, concern played across Ruth's face. Within a few seconds however, Samantha forgot her confusion and returned to rocking the toy.

Samantha played with the doll regularly, but to make sure she didn't get tempted to chew it, Ruth initially brought it upstairs whenever she wasn't able to supervise her. Internally however, Samantha knew she would never harm such a beautiful human girl, even when left alone.

One evening, Ruth finally seemed to agree. She went to the kitchen to prepare dinner, but this time, she left Samantha in the living room to continue playing with the doll. Now that mama wasn't looking, Samantha grew tired of rocking the baby to sleep. Feeling how cold the doll's porcelain skin was, Samantha gently wrapped her body around the toy to warm it. Samantha decided she liked this as much as rocking the doll. Just as she started grooming its hair with her teeth, her ears flicked as her mother's soft footfalls approached from around the hall. Samantha abruptly went back to rocking the doll before mama was in view. When she turned the corner, Ruth calmly informed the girl that her supper dish was full.

As her parents sat down at the kitchen table to have dinner themselves, Samantha ate from the dish on the floor, then snuck back to the living room. Ruth noticed and followed her, only to find Samantha dropping her food on the carpet near the human girl.

"We've been over this!" Ruth cried out.

Frightened, Samantha lifted the human girl in her jaws and tried to run away.

"Get back here!" Ruth called after the girl.

Lowering her body to the ground, Samantha turned around and let Ruth take the doll from her jaws. Ruth looked it over while she lectured Samantha about the mess she made on the carpet, telling her that she certainly can't handle the doll with her mouth, she's surely broken—

Ruth fell silent when she saw the doll was still in pristine condition.

"Even I couldn't have been so delicate," Ruth whispered, more to herself than to Samantha.

Ruth told Samantha that now she can play however she wished, just as long as she was not destructive. She went on to praise Samantha for making a real effort to improve. And she *had*. Something compassionate grew within the girl, blossoming more with each passing day. Ruth credited the Bible studies which the girl had lapped up eagerly. She couldn't be happier to learn "all about God" and how he created everyone, "including Sammy!" In no time at all, Samantha was convinced that "God loves ev-ree-one veh-ree much and has a plan for us all!" She was certain of that. It's what mama told her after all!

Calvin and Ruth taught Samantha prayers, which she recited before meals and bed each night. Even unsupervised, Samantha said her prayers either before or after eating any game she caught while playing outside. Although most of the time Samantha was careful to keep out of view—she was awful "scare-uh stray-guuuurs"—her parents told her that people have still caught glimpses of the fox with human bands said to stalk around the McGimsie farm. It was not that frequent, as few had cause to travel to the outskirts of town, but it had happened often enough that they decided they must address keeping Samantha with someone named "the mayor."

On that October evening, Samantha waited as her parents had their meeting with the mayor. It was not the first time she had been left unattended. After a few successful trials, Calvin and Ruth started leaving her unsupervised while they resumed their church attendance. Samantha was generally better behaved now that she had toys to chew on and she made an extra effort only to scent mark and dig outside, which was still a problem, but more manageable. For this reason, Calvin spoke of building the girl an enclosure so she had her own space to scent mark and dig. He had bought some timbers and wire mesh and already started work on it, hoping to be finished before it finally snowed.

Just as Samantha considered that last point, she was roused from her thoughts when she heard someone walking around outside. Assuming it must be her parents returning, Samantha got up to light candles for them. When the front door didn't open, Samantha rotated each of her ears in opposite directions to pinpoint their precise location. The sounds made her realize that the new arrival was not at the front door. Instead, whoever it was stalked around the periphery of the house. Concerned, Samantha opened up the front door had a good sniff, just to make sure it really was her mama. She scented nothing but farm odors. Straining her ears to detect even the most minute crunch on the grass, Samantha didn't hear anything until the "*hoo-hoo-hooooah!*" cry of a great horned owl broke the silence.

Samantha's tail curled around her legs as she considered closing the door. Then as if to coax her outside, the breeze finally brought a scent. Wool, like that of her doll or the one her mother reserved for church. As that was Ruth's only fancy clothing, she wore it into town today just as Calvin wore his linen church suit to accompany her. Samantha was sure this must mean "mama and dada" were home, even though she could not smell dada's suit on the wind and there was an additional scent mixed in with the wool; a sweet odor she had never experienced before.

Ears flat, mouth gaping and tail curled down between her legs, Samantha kept to the shadows. Despite her shrunken posture, Samantha followed the sweet woolen smell as her curiosity got the better of her. Just as she lost the scent, she heard footfalls coming from the opposite side of the house. Ears flicking, Samantha crawled around the periphery of her home until she saw a blurry shape at the tree before the window where she had watched the dog fox. Samantha's nostrils expanded and she confirmed both the woolen scent and the sweet odor were drifting from this shape, along with the fresh, clean scent of another creature. Intrigued, the girl forgot her fear and crept closer to the shape, which grew clearer as she drew nearer. Though Samantha still struggled to focus on the details, she thought she could make out long, silky hair and a beautiful woolen wrap coat. At the same time however, the closer she got, the more Samantha had to raise her head, straining to view these clearer details. Walking on all fours significantly impacted her vision. To speak with her, mama and dada often had to sit down at Samantha's level or place her on a chair. When Samantha wanted a good look at her parents, she often reared up on her hind legs which seemed like a good option under these circumstances. Once Samantha was within a few meters of the shape, she stood up on her hind legs to get an even better look at—yes! The shape had a dress and hair just like those of her doll!

"Human... girl?" choked Samantha.

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Instead of focusing on the chill of the wind, Gloria Chambers focused on the warmth against her bosom as she made her way to the McGimsie farm. That comfort came courtesy of the cat she cradled in one arm while her free hand carried a flashlight. Gloria's blue eyes concentrated on the beam of light it cast before her. They were uncharacteristically solemn for a girl of fourteen years.

Perhaps her demeanor was in compensation for her short stature and thin—almost frail—physique, which made her look even younger than she was. She also tried to make up for that by wearing a woolen wrap coat which was just a little too big for her. Its fur collar billowed in the wind, making her seem a touch larger and—she hoped—older. Gloria wore nothing to shield her ears from the chill in the air, as even if there was no one around to admire her long raven hair, she wouldn't cover it. She likely wouldn't until the snow arrived, and in a further an effort to appear adult, she always doused herself in the sweet perfume her father had bought her; a luxury in the generally poor community of Blackbird Peak. She even wanted to wear makeup like her mother, but she was forbidden from it, and considering her already fair complexion, it wouldn't have made much difference in her appearance.

Gloria was hardly a stranger to such grandeur. Her father was named Phillip Chambers, a man who had made his fortune selling plots of land and working the stock market. He was so successful that although he made sure his wife and daughter were well provided for—even indulged—he remained frugal in comparison to others in their social class. By the time Gloria turned ten, her mother, a sullen woman named Donna, started demanding more. Even the makeup Donna covered herself in could not hide worry lines her obsession had etched in her face. While Phillip was well-liked, most took an aversion to Donna. For despite her expensive clothing and large house, the woman's exposure to other upper-class wives left her demanding more access to nonessentials which ultimately led to the Chambers family relocating to Blackbird Peak. Ostensibly, it was because Phillip felt he could make even more money owning and operating the mines there. In reality, it was because he wanted to quarantine his daughter from the high society culture that he felt corrupted his wife.

As moving was a bit scary for Gloria, Phillip consoled her with a well-bred kitten she named Mary. As Mary grew into a cat, she became protective of Gloria and the girl brought her nearly everywhere, especially early on. This changed a little when Gloria took a liking to a boy named Joseph, the son of a local Ojibwe woman named Niimi. Gloria would leave Mary home if she was going to spend time with Joseph, feeling safe around him. In fact, she grew rather infatuated with the lad, even if Joseph gave no indication that he felt the same way. Although Gloria never admitted her feelings outright, Phillip could tell and found it concerning. Mixed marriages had occurred since the earliest days of Indigenous-European contact in Canada, yet many in Blackbird Peak still frowned upon them. He was also well-aware of how the Métis—the result of Cree and French contract—were treated and feared what may become of his daughter if things ever became serious between her and Joseph. Moreover, Phillip himself generally disapproved of “half-breed” families, and to Gloria's silent indignation, often described them as “degenerate” over the dinner table.

When she spent time with Joseph, Gloria attempted to ignore her father's attitude. Instead, she focused on the fascinating stories Joseph told her, which included both Christian parables and those from Ojibwe tradition. Although Joseph was not permitted to know about these tales let alone share them publicly, she was vaguely aware that Father Brady had arranged a deal of some sort to get Joseph out of residential school early. Brady said it was so Joseph could settle in Blackbird Peak to aid his mother following his father's death, but as Joseph had been thoroughly indoctrinated during his time away, Gloria suspected that it was a way to continue promoting Catholicism among the aboriginals in this community. Since then, Niimi had shared the old stories with her son and even attempted to teach him their language, though he was not allowed to speak it. Trusting only Gloria, Joseph liked to share these tales with her.

Given his interest in learning the old stories, Joseph was fascinated by the rumors he heard of

the fox-girl at the McGimsie farm. He wished he could sneak a glimpse of her, but his mother forbade it. The McGimsies clearly weren't comfortable with others being aware of the fox-girl and Niimi wanted to respect their wishes.

Regardless, Gloria decided that she wanted to get the first good look at the fox-girl to impress Joseph and resolved to bide her time. She even considered skipping church one Sunday by feigning illness as that seemed to be the only time Calvin and Ruth headed into town. This proved unnecessary, as on her way home after seeing Joseph that evening, Gloria observed Calvin and Ruth making their way into town. Recognizing an opportunity, Gloria headed home to grab her flashlight in anticipation of the onset of darkness. Night would surely fall once she reached the McGimsie farm. Once there, she also scooped up Mary to provide her with protection, thinking that perhaps she could even tell the story at the October barn dance this year. Stories that were allegedly true were a prized commodity at that event.

Envisioning herself as the heroine of the fairy tale in a storybook, Gloria went to the closet to change from her expensive silk clothing to wool. Although she fancied herself a female Jack Spriggins, Gloria still wanted to make sure her best clothes weren't ruined in case she had to make a run for it. A part of her felt a little guilty, as even her worst clothes were made from more expensive fabrics than Joseph's best.

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Gloria arrived at an aged farm gate, its base bordered with frosted sedges and blue wild-rye. Beyond the gate was a path swathed with the trees marking the woodland edge. Gloria placed Mary down on the ground and let her slide through the gap between the post as she climbed over it, using only one hand while she held her flashlight in the other. As her feet crunched the frozen leaves on the other side, she heard something scuttle away into the fir trees, perhaps fleeing from an enemy. Gloria paused. Aside from the wind, no further sounds followed. She breathed a sigh of relief and scooped Mary up again as quickly as she could.

Wind whirled around Gloria as she advanced down the path. Quivering branches knocked together and the sound married to the hushed howl of the breeze. To Gloria, it seemed like spectral assailants were whispering and moaning from the covert. The thrill of imagining herself on a storybook quest receded. Was this a fairy story of a child outsmarting a monster to earn a boon—even if that boon was simply the story itself—or was this one of *scary* stories told at the barn dances? Or like in the tales Joseph told her? The ones that—unlike those in her books—didn't tend to end well for the children involved?

Trembling, Gloria clutched Mary tighter as she flashed her torch over the shadowy thicket. That did little to comfort her. Everything from the birch, maple, and spruce trees in the forest to the ground-pines lining her path had an enclosing effect. Gloria subconsciously constricted her posture, squeezing Mary too tight and thus coaxing a discomfited “*mrow*” from the feline. With a whispered apology to her pet, Gloria loosened her hold as she held her flashlight out directly in front of her. The circular glow it cast as she advanced made it feel like she was following a sunbeam through a tunnel.

The path faded away into farmland but this place seemed no less claustrophobic. Despite the yellow, autumn-marked fields and pastures beyond, the deteriorated fencing combined with the overgrowth of honeysuckle to make Gloria feel trapped. She pushed on regardless, eventually arriving at a two-story farmhouse. While not debilitated, it was in need of fresh paint. In the moonlight, the general neglect made it seem as menacing as a haunted manor. Gloria thought of how the fencing had recently gone to ruin as well. Other matters were occupying the McGimsies.

Those matters became palpable to Gloria as her nostrils took in a pungent, musky smell. Coughing, she jerked back. This was an animal odor, completely different to the fresh, clean smell she associated with her cat. Gloria cast her flashlight in the odor's direction, which illuminated a trail of chewed toys and freshly dug holes. Having been splashed with an awful musk, they were the origin of the smell that Gloria could only describe as a skunk drenched in ammonia. Was this—the thought was almost too disgusting to consider—was this *urine*?

Turning a corner around the house, Gloria's torch cast over an autumn-frosted maple tree adjacent to a window. The pungent smell grew all the stronger as she got closer to it. She walked up to touch the tree and saw wire mesh, a kennel, and the beginnings of an enclosure around it. Gloria stepped back. Were the McGimsies looking to keep the fox-girl contained... was she *dangerous*?

As Gloria backed off from the tree, she stumbled over something protruding from the ground. Gloria looked down in horror to see the half-buried body of a grouse which despite being partially dug up had not been eaten. Anxiety filled Gloria as she turned around with an icy resolve that made Mary's fur bristle. Gloria committed to leaving this place as quickly as possible, whether or not she saw the—

"Human... girl?" coughed a guttural voice from behind Gloria.

Gloria turned. She was faced with an uncanny shape standing upright before her; undeniably animal yet indescribably human. Its vertical pupils slimmed down to slits as they focused upon Gloria just before she lifted her flashlight, the light from which rendered the creature's eyes a pair of glowing green orbs. The sight triggered a memory in Gloria. At last year's October's barn dance, her father told stories about his travels through the bogs of Scotland—they *sounded just like the swamplands of Blackbird Peak*—where he encountered will-o'-the-wisps. Didn't someone else say they were called *brujas* in Mexico? Another adult had reported the locals believed these lights to be *witches* in disguise.

(*Witches like Myeen—*)

(*No, remember what Joseph said! Don't even think that name! Just run; just—*)

She desperately wanted to run, desperately she did. But instead, Gloria just stood frozen in fear as the creature edged nearer. Near enough to—

(*Oh God, oh God, oh God, it's going to, it's going to—*)

—near enough to *touch* her!

"Human *girl*?" retched the creature again, its mouth hanging open to reveal forty-two, scimitar-shaped fangs. Regardless of whatever its actual size was, the creature seemed to tower over Gloria as it reached out for her face. Gloria shrieked, sending shudders through Mary—who instinctively slashed at the creature!

The creature reared back with a jolt, quick enough to avoid Mary's claws, but at the cost of its balance. As it toppled over onto the ground, Mary leapt from Gloria's arms, back raised ferociously. The creature scarcely hit the grass before scrambling back up to all fours and taking off in a frenzied, squalling panic.

Mary pursued the creature as it leapt onto the pile of timbers, and from there, ran up the tree and onto a branch. Mary ignored the timbers and climbed the tree directly. For a split-second, Gloria could see them occupying the branch together and realized there wasn't a huge size difference between the terrified creature and her little cat. A twinge of guilt needled at her heart. Perhaps the creature (*perhaps she?*) meant no harm, perhaps—

The creature swerved off the branch and onto the farmhouse roof. When Mary followed, the creature abruptly snapped around and hissed, exposing carnassial teeth that resembled serrated

scissors. The cat reeled back in surprise yet there was nowhere to reel back to. She plummeted from the roof, disappearing into the mass of overgrowth below.

The weight of Gloria's sinking heart crushed any seed of compassion for the creature that may have stirred within her. It was replaced with panic and concern for Mary. In one hysterical motion, Gloria dropped her flashlight and rushed to the bushes, fearing only for her cat until she emerged from the garden unharmed. Mary had had righted herself in time to land on her feet but that was of little comfort to Gloria as she anxiously knelt down to collect her in her arms, then looked up at the creature.

The creature remained perched on the rooftop, mouth gaping open like a grinning gargoyle. Berserk chatters of "*Gek-gek-gek-gek-gek!*" exploded from its throat like the *rat-tat-tat-tat-tat!* of machinegun fire.

Leaving her flashlight behind, Gloria whirled around and ran away with Mary huddled close to her chest. As she fled, she could not tell if the feverish screaming she heard was her cat, the creature in pursuit, or her own frantic cries.

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Long after the human girl ran away with the monster cradled in her arms, Samantha remained perched defensively on the roof, afraid to stop gekkering in case the monster returned. She had never smelt such fear on anything before, not even the prey she killed, but she was glad that fear prevented them from hurting her.

Samantha didn't come down until she thought she detected two figures arriving back within the farm, although she couldn't be sure. She could just about make out the path leading down to the gate that marked the entrance to the farm. She had even scent marked it once or twice before mama told her not to. Without smells or sounds to aid her vision however, at this distance the area was a blur. She didn't like to rely on her eyes for this reason, but it had felt like a long time since mama and dada had left, and they might be upset in they saw her on the roof. Samantha leapt onto the tree branch, and from there, onto the timbers. Moist earth clinging to her pads as she ran inside, rearing up on her hind legs to open the front door, silently praying that her parents wouldn't scold her for being a bad girl.

Just before Samantha shut the front door, she caught the linen scent of the suit her father wore into town on the breeze. It was unmistakable and contrasted sharply with the smell of cotton and leather that Samantha had learned to associate with him. The first time he wore it to church, the change in Calvin's attire alarmed Samantha. After recognizing his individual scent and the reassuring sound of his voice, Samantha had quickly forgotten her fears and the smell never worried her again. At least, not until now. Samantha remembered that the human girl's clothing had smelled like her mother's church clothes. What if it wasn't mama and dada? Could these be more strangers, more *monsters* in disguise, coming to do her harm?

After locking the house back up, Samantha cowered under the furniture. Eventually, she heard the door open, and the outside air brought in more than just the scent of clothing. It also carried the unique onion-like smell of her mother along with her father's individual fragrance, which always reminded Samantha of fresh, delicious cheese. Relief washed over the girl as she forgot the terror that had dominated her mind only moments ago. Mama and dada had arrived; she was *safe!*

Samantha rushed to the front door, flattening her ears and narrowing her eyes as she trashed her tail and wiggled at their feet. Calvin scooped Samantha up his arms and took her into the living

room where he cuddled her as she whined happily. Following a quick detour into the kitchen, Ruth followed them, holding treats that she fed to Samantha by hand.

“These are to apologize for arriving home so late,” smiled Ruth. “We had no idea the mayor would keep us that long.”

After Samantha had been suitably spoiled, Calvin and Ruth did their best to seat the fidgeting little girl in a chair before them.

“Sit still,” insisted Ruth through gritted teeth. “We need to talk.”

Once Samantha had calmed, Calvin and Ruth reminded her that they had just spoken to the mayor, admitting to him that yes, they are keeping a “fox-girl” at their farm. But they convinced him that given her intelligence, she deserved to be taken care of.

“Fox-girl?” asked Samantha. “What—*kak*—what fox-girl?”

“You are!” exclaimed Calvin, followed by an affectionate chuckle.

“Fox-girl hoo-man girl?” asked Samantha.

“Not exactly,” clarified Ruth. “A fox-girl isn’t simply a girl, but also a...”

Ruth paused, not sure how to proceed.

“Also fox?” guessed Samantha.

“Ah, correct...” replied Ruth, after another moment of deliberation.

“What fox?”

“A fox is an animal, like what we have around the farm or the food you like you catch yourself.”

“Or like the frog in story we read you!” added Calvin.

Ruth went on to describe a fox to Samantha. With that in mind, Samantha made the connection between foxes and the creature she saw digging up her grouse.

“Sammy unner-stan’!” beamed Samantha. “Fox-girl is girl fox!”

“Well, you’re not quite a fox,” explained Ruth. “Foxes are wild animals and cannot think the way you do. In that respect, you’re more like a human girl.”

“No am-nal girls?” asked Samantha, tilting her head to the side.

“Well, there are animal *females*,” replied Ruth. “I’m not sure there are animal *girls*...”

“Girls all hoo-man?”

“A girl is... well, I think the simplest way to put it is that a girl is a human female.”

“Sammy hoo-man?”

“Er, well, that’s what need to convince the town of, yes.”

“*Why* Sammy fox-girl?”

Ruth took another a moment to think.

“We’re not quite sure,” she exhaled. “The mayor mentioned a meteorite that was rumored to fall somewhere in Massachusetts around forty years ago. It was rumored to have changed the plants and animals there. We wondered if something similar fell in Blackbird Peak, but couldn’t find any records of—”

“Sammy from fore-est?” the fox-girl interrupted; her tone was hurried and carried a note of insecurity.

Calvin’s eyes widened while the corners of Ruth’s lips drew down.

“You mean, you don’t—ah—that’s, that’s where Cal—where daddy found you, yes...” stammered Ruth.

“Sammy... Sammy not from mama?” the fox-girl whimpered pitifully, only half-aware of a stream of desperation trickling into her voice.

“Uh, no,” replies Ruth after a moment’s hesitation. “No, you, uh, you, you didn’t...”

“But Sammy still...” the fox-girl crouched down even lower. “Sammy still mama’s and dada’s... right?”

Unable to find the words to reply, Ruth pulled Samantha into a reassuring hug. In moments, the fox-girl also felt her father’s soothing fingers scratching behind her left ear.

“When I found you in the woods, you hadn’t eaten,” said Calvin. “You were dehydrated, covered in ticks; could’ve died any minute. You needed someone to take care of you. But when I brought you home, fed you up, and you grabbed my thumb, I’ll never forget it because—” Calvin smiled. “Because I knew you didn’t just need us. You belonged with us. You’re our girl. Our daughter. That’s all there is to it.”

Ruth grinned as well.

“Our gift from God,” added Calvin.

A twitch of frustration snaked through Ruth. She allowed it to pass silently as she continued cuddling Samantha. The girl couldn’t see the change in Ruth’s expression but she can smell the change in her scent and felt her body grow slightly—almost imperceptively—more rigid.

To get the conversation back on track, Ruth told Samantha that as part of their agreement with the mayor, she must prove to the community that she is human. Calvin and Ruth both agreed, and the mayor scheduled a meeting for late January to let the town decide if Samantha’s human enough to stay. This would give the mayor time to gradually introduce the populace to the idea of a fox-girl, while also providing Calvin and Ruth with the opportunity to prepare Samantha to present herself properly at the meeting.

“I know you can do it Samantha,” encouraged Ruth. “You were able to learn to be good around the house. You were even able to be gentle with the ‘human girl’ I gave you.”

The memory of the *real* human girl she just met crept back into Samantha’s mind. She felt a little uncomfortable but buried the emotion like an unwanted mole.

“If she’s going to be able to adapt to life as a girl, she’s still going to need a reasonable outlet for her instincts,” remarked Calvin. “Otherwise, they’ll just fester inside of her. I say the first order of business is completing that project I started.”

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Calvin was referring to building Samantha an outdoor enclosure, and he returned to work on it the next day. Samantha followed him outside to the tree with the wire mesh and timbers that he used to build it. By then, the sun had already eliminated the scents of the monster and the girl, but Samantha still shrunk back when she tripped over the flashlight nearby, remembering what happened last night.

“Do you know where this came from?” he asked.

“Not want tell! *Kak-kak-kak!*” barked Sammy. “Mama be *mad!*”

“I promise I’ll keep this between us,” promised Calvin.

Samantha admitted a monster brought it. Calvin shuddered, fearing that perhaps it came from another monster who—like the coyote-creature he refused to name—had access to human tools. He asked Samantha to tell him the story. She obeyed, but given her difficulties expressing herself, Calvin interpreted it like some kind of cat creature attacked her at night then fled back into the woods. Calvin feared this will turn people—perhaps even Ruth—against Samantha.

“You were right not to tell mama about this,” said Calvin as he slipped the flashlight into his back pocket. “Promise me you’ll never tell anyone else either.”

Samantha promised, and Calvin warned her never to venture into the woods as there were *more* monsters there.

.....

Samantha intended to listen to her father's warning but still felt drawn to the woods because the breeze sometimes brought the smell of foxes from between the trees, which she recognized as being similar to the one she saw digging up her grouse. Along with the foxes, there were also dozens of other scents. They tickled her nose and piqued her curiosity, giving her this urge to leave and never come back. She felt conflicted about because she enjoyed life with her parents. Sometimes, her mind felt strange and blank when she spent too much time staring across the pasture to the forest beyond.

The enclosure was built around the tree adjacent to the house. Upon gaining access to it, Samantha promptly wiped the tree with the sides of her jaw and mouth, tagging it with the stench of her intralingual glands. Upon completion, the enclosure measured sixty feet by fifteen feet with a wire roof and fencing. Calvin arranged the ground around the entrances and placed rocks there.

"My hope is this will help you feel at home," he said.

When Samantha asked why, Calvin said Ruth told him wild foxes like that, which is also the reason he made sure the enclosure has two entrances; one at the front and one at the back. Samantha was concerned again by being referred to as a "wild fox," but said nothing. Although she lacked the facial muscles to make any expression that would indicate her thoughts, Calvin replied as though he could smell her feelings the way she could smell his.

"You're not *just* a fox," he confirmed. "You're a *fox-girl*. To prove it, I'm giving you your freedom."

Calvin encouraged Samantha to rear up and open the doors with her human hands, demonstrating she could come and go as she pleased. While Samantha had an impermeable kennel in the enclosure to rest in, Calvin still brought her to sleep inside at night, even though Ruth questioned it.

"What was the point of including a kennel?" she asked.

Calvin didn't answer, but Samantha knew it was in case any more monsters came back at night. Consequently, the enclosure functioned as more like a playroom than anything else. Nevertheless, it still carried out its intended goal as Samantha's personal space. Inside, she was encouraged to dig holes, crawl around, and even break wooden toys that Calvin built for her. Ruth filled these toys with her meals, which were usually dead chicks. When Samantha was "extra good," she was rewarded with treats such as cheese, fruit, peanuts, and even whole chickens! Although she did not care much for vegetables, she still ate them like a "good girl" when Ruth secretly stuffed her chickens with them.

The wooden toys replaced Samantha's need to eat out of a supper dish and allowed her to be herself without making trouble either inside or around the farm. Now that Samantha had her instincts under control in the enclosure, it was time for the next goal: teaching her to walk upright like a human.

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It snowed the morning Calvin and Ruth prepared to teach Samantha to walk. It began with the familiar pitter-patter of October rain upon the roof, but soon, the weather had dropped enough that tiny flecks of white danced down from the sky as well. In no time, the frost on the windowpanes was accompanied by a sheet of white on the stool. Before her parents had even led her outside, Samantha saw that the barn and her enclosure had vanished under the white surfs of winter.

Having never experienced snow at a time when she was old enough to remember it, Samantha was initially fearful of this fluffy, malleable substance. Her eyes widened with trepidation as she considered how drastically and suddenly her world had changed. Tentatively, she scented the air, concerned by how much more difficult it had become to smell. That had briefly worried her when first frost settled over the landscape last month, but her concerns melted with the frozen earth as the sun prompted familiar smells to return.

That day however, the smells weren't merely dampened. The entire landscape has transformed! Distrustful of the shimmering white feathers falling silently around her, Samantha snapped at them—only to find they had disappeared, leaving no more than an icy wet residue on her tongue. Feeling the same sensation around her face, Samantha shook the wet power off and took off into a run. Shocked, she noticed the imprint of her hands and feet trailing after her in the snow, only stopping when she did. She looked back the way she came, Samantha realized that she was gliding as easily over the snow as she would stroll through a mist. Far behind, her parents blundered through the same substance on two legs.

In that instant, Samantha's fear was forgotten. She grew amused that she had an advantage over her parents. After all, she wasn't just a girl, she was a *fox-girl*! With exaltation, Samantha dashed through this sparking, white playground, leaping and snapping at the snow, thinking to herself how wonderful it was to be a fox! To regain Samantha's attention, Ruth tempted her back with peanuts, fruit, and cheese!

Samantha came running and thumping her brush against the white powder to find Ruth dangling the treats just out of reach. Once her parents encouraged her to stop trying to jump up to get the treats, Samantha balanced on her hind legs. Measuring about three feet from the tip of her snout to the end of her tail, Samantha's head just about reached Ruth's upper thigh as she did so. Calvin and Ruth rewarded Samantha with the treats, as well as hugs, kisses and praise. Next, Ruth walked backwards with a treat as Calvin led Samantha on a leash for additional support. For the first few weeks of this, Samantha hopped after the food like a rabbit. But by December, Samantha was not merely hopping after the food, she was walking after it! Once it was Christmastime, she was doing so without the leash. She even tried to follow Calvin into the forest as he cut down a balsam fir for their Christmas tree, until he reminded her of her promise never to enter the woods.

As Calvin cut down the tree, Ruth busied herself by sewing Samantha some warm winter clothes to wear for her first Christmas morning, which she giftwrapped and presented to her on Christmas Day. Like a good girl, Samantha resisted chewing on the giftwrapped boxes surrounding the tree.

"These are different," smiled Ruth. "They're like your wooden toys...if you break them open, you'll find a prize!"

Excited, Samantha tore open the gifts with her jaws. Inside, she was delighted to find new soft toys to chew on! Samantha also received another special gift. This one wasn't gift wrapped but brought downstairs by Ruth. It was her mother's porcelain doll

"You've proven you're a good girl," said Ruth. "I want you to keep this in your own room now."

That delighted Samantha. After opening presents, Samantha's playtime that day was divided between tossing and chewing the soft toys like a fox and cuddling and caring for her porcelain doll like a girl. Playtime ended at noon when it was time for the McGimsies to enjoy lunch. While Samantha usually ate in her enclosure now, Christmas was a time for family. Accordingly, she ate from a bowl on the kitchen floor as they sat at the table.

Afterwards, Ruth and Calvin told Samantha the story of the nativity, during which she learned “Jesus became a hoo-man—*kak-kak-kak*—just like mama and dada and—!”

Samantha paused a beat, unsure if Jesus became like her.

“And just like Sammy,” grinned Ruth as she scratched under her daughter’s chin.

Samantha thrashed her tail upon hearing that and chittered in approval. She thought about how excited she was for the day when she would get to accompany her parents to church to hear more about Jesus. Foxes may get to have fun in the snow, but girls get to have fun indoors!

After opening presents, Calvin and Ruth took Samantha on a walk just a little way into the winter woods, each holding one of her hands as she walked upright, wearing the warm clothing Ruth made for her.

“She doesn’t really need it,” commented Calvin as he gestured to her natural winter coat.

“She does need clothes to look like a gir—” began Ruth, when Samantha interrupted her with a gush of excited shrieks. The fox-girl fell to all fours and nimbly glided over the snow, running away from her parents then back again—when suddenly, her ears perked up! Samantha leapt up onto her hind legs and asked if she could catch the voles that she heard running about in tunnels beneath the snow.

“That’s fine just so long as it’s outside,” replied Ruth.

Samantha stopped and listened until she located the position of the vole under the snow. She silently approached, lining the location of the sound up with the shadowy ring that appeared when she focused hard enough on the northeast. Then after swaying back-and-forth to get ready, Samantha leapt into an eighty-degree pounce, her hands collapsing the tunnel around the vole as she landed. Her head soon followed allowing the fox-girl’s snapping jaws to close over her prey.

Samantha emerged from the snow, gulping the vole down happily, followed by a hurried prayer of thanks.

“In name of fah-her, son, and ho-lee spee-rit,” she began. Before she finished, Samantha sneezed, shaking the snow off her snout as her mama and dada laughed.

Chapter Three Summary:

On a January evening, Samantha and her parents headed through town to attend the meeting. The fox-girl walked between her parents on her hind legs, holding their hands for security. Underneath her winter clothes, she wore a pretty yellow dress that her mother sewed for her. At least, she was reasonably sure it was yellow; she often got colours wrong. Be that as it may, mama and dada seemed to agree this time. She trusted her mama that the dress was yellow, and more importantly, looked pretty even though Ruth could only afford to sew her a cotton one. Her fluffy winter coat had finished developing in December, and Ruth said it complimented the dress by making her look cuddlier.

“That makes you look cuter,” she said as they approached the town hall. “That’s good as it’s important the town likes you.”

The streets were freshly shoveled and it looked like all the townspeople had been scooped up along with the snow, for everybody had already gone to the town hall. Samantha experienced all kinds of new sights and smells on her way there. It was dark out and all the shops were closed, so by comparison, the town hall’s lighted windows resembled glowing coals or a demon’s eyes. When the door opened and she entered with her parents, she felt like she was being consumed by some massive beast.

Upon setting foot within the bright room, Samantha's dilated pupils narrowed down to thin slits. The distinct smells and sounds of countless strangers all crammed their way into her nose and ears at once. As these blurred monsters turned to look at her, she secreted the pungent odor of fear and refused to take another step forward, considering stillness her best bet at safety. Given the fox-girl's two-hundred-and-sixty-degree vision, she felt all the more surrounded. The only spot of town hall Samantha that escaped her notice was the front door—until it clicked shut directly behind her like a thunderbolt striking her brush. Samantha scrambled to all fours and tried to run away.

Ignoring the horrible odor Samantha was giving off, Calvin grabbed her by the scuff of her neck and enfolded her against his chest. As they took a seat, Calvin covered Samantha's eyes to calm her and spoke to her soothingly, leaving Ruth to do most of the talking.

This did not make a great first impression. Samantha could literally smell the fear on the townspeople as they wondered if she was one of the monsters in the forest. Someone else commented on this being some kind of freak of evolution, and that led to further arguments amongst the townspeople concerning heresy. Someone else speculated about shapeshifting witches called skin-walkers that he heard about while travelling in America.

"That sounds like Myeengun," said a sixteen-year-old Ojibwe girl, before she was shushed by her parents.

The mention of this Myeengun character scared the townspeople into silence. Ruth took advantage of that to steer the conversation back on track.

"Samantha's no monster," began Ruth, making the tactical decision to avoid mentioning the coyote-creature. Instead, she simply stated that Calvin found what amounts to an abandoned human baby starving to death in the woods. Maybe she was deformed in such a way that vaguely resembles certain myths, but as the community now followed Christ, such beliefs were supposed to be discarded.

Upon hearing Christ mentioned, Samantha instinctively recited the Lord's Prayer to comfort herself.

"Our Fah-ter-kak-kak-kak-who art in-kak-hee-ven," she chanted, her voice a gasping cough. "Hah-losed-kak-be thy-kak-kak-kak-na-kak-me..."

This shocked the town into silence, until a certain white teenager spoke up.

"It's just mindlessly repeating phrases like a parrot," spat Gloria.

Although she could not see her, Samantha concentrated on Gloria's scent from the heavy perfume she wore, identifying it even though it drowned her individual scent. Gloria's clothing also smelled different today; it was silk rather than wool. Nevertheless, Samantha decided to try her best to concentrate on the perfume as she prayed. Although Gloria frightened her at home, Samantha found that just identifying the speaker gave her something to focus on and thus helped to calm her.

"Samantha's praying for comfort," implored Calvin. "She knows what she's saying; she holds well-reasoned conversations at home! She's hum—"

"It's barely half human," spat Gloria, more to the boy beside her than to Calvin.

The boy did not respond to Gloria directly, though from the rustle of his movements as he stood up, Samantha could tell he was sitting next to her. As his eyes surveyed the townspeople, they saw his clothing and noted that it was old and worn. His mother sat behind him, and likewise, wore tatty clothing. In spite of her career as the only physician in Blackbird Peak, the woman charged very little money. Being a woman didn't help matters, for the settlers didn't take her very seriously in such a position, but that wasn't why she didn't charge much. She made her services available to whoever needed them to honor the sense of duty to her community that her shaman forefathers

had instilled in her. Its quality notwithstanding, their garb was clearly that of the white settlers in Blackbird Peak rather than their Ojibwe ancestors. Only the boy's rough black hair and dark skin revealed his race. Even culturally, while he respected the rumble of thunder and flash of lightning, he believed these spirits existed under the rule of Jehovah rather than Kiccimanito.

"If Samantha is even partly human, then she was made in the image of God," said the boy. "So, it's our duty as Christians to accept her."

"What are you doing Joseph?" whispered Gloria. Her voice was so low that the only two people who could hear it were the boy she named and Samantha, who would have heard her faintest whisper forty yards away.

Joseph, thought Samantha, associating the name with the calm smell drifting from the boy. Samantha felt it suited his soft voice, the sweet tone of which set both her ears a cock. There was a bit of an oily quality to him as well, which reminded Samantha of her father on the few hot days in Blackbird Peak.

The intervention of Joseph prompted his mother to agree as well.

"I'm with my son on this one," said Niimi, resting her hand on her son's shoulder.

When Niimi supported Samantha, so did Father Brady, seeing this as a way to continue promoting Catholicism amongst aboriginals. With the priest's approval, most of the community warmed up to Samantha, although this just made Gloria resent her all the more.

In time, Samantha calmed enough for Calvin to remove his hand from her eyes. She stopped repeating the Lord's Prayer and looked to see a blurry form that smelled like Joseph approaching her. Gloria pulled on the back of his shirt, telling him not to get too close.

"It could bite!" she cried.

"I know what I'm doing," replied Joseph.

Gloria reluctantly released Joseph and backed off. She watched from a distance as he approached Samantha. The fox-girl sat nervously on Calvin's lap. She wanted to flee but resisted the urge, even though Calvin no longer restrained her.

With Calvin's encouragement, Samantha allowed Joseph, or as Calvin called him, "the nice boy who stuck up for you," to pet her. Joseph was careful to raise his hand to Samantha's level rather than lowering it from above.

"I thought so... my dogs recognized that as threatening," he said to Calvin.

Joseph started by scratching under Samantha's neck, then gently moved his hand to scratch behind her ears. Samantha calmed at Joseph's touch, though her demeanor remained cautious. Flicking her flattened ears tentatively, she sniffed at Joseph for more clues, her fear giving way to curiosity. He had a different scent to Gloria or her mother, but not quite the same as that of her father. She could also see him clearly now that that he was close. His shoulder length dark hair shone beautifully in the artificial night, which appeared behind his head like a halo. She wanted so desperately to touch that lovely hair...

"Human... boy?" she finally asked, before tentatively trying to groom his hair with her teeth, like she did with her doll. Joseph laughed at the gesture and continued massaging her ears. Samantha's ears perked up at the pleasant sound.

"Yeah, I'm a human boy," he replied.

Samantha gazed into Joseph's eyes while he continued to stroke her. She could feel the warmth of human compassion burning within them, even if she couldn't quite see the details. It was a warmth that soon filled her eyes as well. The last of her anxiety disappeared, leaving the fox-girl's vertical pupils looking round, trusting and innocent.



In her bedroom, Samantha reflected with embarrassment on her fear of the townspeople but felt better when she remembered Joseph petting her. She was a little jealous that the mean girl with the monster got to sit next to him. Why would such a nice boy sit with someone like that? Was it because of how she looked?

Samantha sat on her bed, running her hands all over the face of her porcelain doll, then over her own face, which included her muzzle. For the first time, looking different really troubled her. When she thought about Joseph, she also felt like she wanted to *do* something, but she didn't know what.

Full of frustrated energy, Samantha fell to all fours and headed outside. There, she paced the farm, letting out high-pitched shrieks and snapping at the empty air before her. Her screams attracted dog foxes, who hovered around the periphery of the farm. Little did Samantha know that a violet scent emerged from the gland at the root of her tail, maddening the dog foxes. Tentatively, they started approaching her, but once Calvin and Ruth came outside too, they dispersed.

"This time of year, they're producing sperm," Ruth murmured.

"Is she... is she in heat?" whispered Calvin.

The fox-girl heard parents in spite of their hushed tone, although she didn't know what they were talking about. Still, she could smell the concern on them and detect the slight tremble in their voices.

"She may be mature for a fox," continued Ruth. "But psychologically, she's just a girl. Call her inside. I don't want her out here at least until March. Perhaps not even in the enclosure."

"Get inside Sammy," Calvin called to Samantha, patting his hands on his knees. "It's cold out."

Samantha obeyed. She didn't understand why she was barking nor what those strange feelings she was experiencing were. She wanted to know, but for some reason, felt too embarrassed to ask.

Inside, Ruth finished prepared dinner while Calvin looked for her supper dish. Samantha hadn't used it since Christmas and he had since misplaced it.

Samantha asked what he's doing, and when he told her, she whined in disapproval! With her tail curled into an arch and her ears flattened sulkily, Samantha leapt into Calvin's arms and gently nibbled at his throat then licked the corners of his mouth.

"Sammy want eat—gek-gek-gek-at tay-bull!" she gekkered. "Like—gek-gek-gek—like girl!"

"I don't know about—" began Calvin, but before he could finish, Samantha threw herself to the ground. Kicking and screaming, she let out a cackling whine that morphed back into aggressive gekkering until Ruth knelt down to console her.

"Honey, it's alright... come on... please, be good..."

Ruth wouldn't normally abide temper tantrums. Even as she embraced Samantha, she thought about how the last thing a parent should do is teach their child that such behavior will be rewarded. At any rate, she realized Samantha's hormones put her under a lot of stress, and following the day's events, Ruth herself was too exhausted for either arguments or discipline. To calm Samantha down, Ruth agreed to set a place for her at the dinner table.

That made the fox-girl happy, although her meal consisted of raw meats and bones rather than the "people food" her parents enjoyed. She also lapped water from the bowl rather than drinking from a glass. While she avoided crawling all the way onto the table, she did rest her hands on it and eat directly off her plate like a fox. Calvin and Ruth said nothing but Samantha could smell the disgust in the air. She stopped. After a pause, she asked for a knife and fork.

Calvin and Ruth said that it was not necessary but Samantha insisted. She sat down in her chair like a human and awkwardly used her hands to eat with the cutlery. The girl did her best to imitate

her mother but frequently dropped the fork while trying to eat the food off it. Ruth offered to help and Samantha agreed. While she still ate awkwardly, with Ruth's help, she managed to maintain hold of her fork while chewing. Soon, she ate without Ruth's help and even drank coffee from a mug, specifically requesting that drink because it's the one her mother enjoyed that evening. While she still needed to stick her muzzle into the cup to lap at it, her hand grasped it firmly and she didn't spill a drop.

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After dinner, Ruth held open the fidgeting Samantha's mouth as she brushed her teeth then tucked her into bed. Ruth did this every night, even though Samantha usually wiggled out of her blankets once mama left, preferring to curl up on top of them with her fluffy brush wrapped over her face. That night however, Samantha kept under the covers. After all, that's how a *girl* would sleep!

Slumber was not forthcoming. Samantha felt too frustrated. The urge to *do* something remained. Defeated, she finally wiggled out of the sheets and tried crawling under the bed. There, she wanted to dig a hole in the floor; to just sink into the blackness in the hope she could bury these strange feelings...

No, she *mustn't!*

To avoid giving in, Samantha crawled out from under the bed and paced her room. She didn't even realize she was on all fours, although she resisted the urge to shriek and wake her parents. As she paced, Samantha heard what she considered to be unsettling noises upstairs. Samantha knew she was not allowed up there, but the noise was so odd. She couldn't resist investigating. Without so much as a creak, Samantha snuck upstairs and into Calvin and Ruth's room. They were making love tenderly, and did so discretely enough that if Samantha were a normal child, she would have heard nothing.

Samantha stared at them in silent confusion, having no idea what was going on. For some reason, she thought about Joseph petting her again. The feelings she got when she started barking bubbled up within her stronger than ever! The urge to *do* something screamed at her and Samantha wanted more than ever to burst into a run, to disappear into the woods where she could *do* things, although she knew not what. She almost didn't care as a familiar blankness began slipping over her mind. Forcing herself to keep a hold on her thoughts, Samantha quietly rose to her hind legs and snuck out of the house and slipped off into the woods. Calvin and Ruth never knew she was there.

The moment the farm was out of sight, Samantha once again dropped to all fours and exploded into a sprint. High-pitched shriek after high-pitched shriek escaped her mouth as the fox-girl let her mind go blank and forgot all about dada's warnings about the forest.

Samantha arrived in a clearing where her heat-fueled cries attracted a young dog fox. Upon seeing him, Samantha cowered while noting his gaunt outline. She squealed wildly and made a chattering noise as the dog fox circled her with his tail raised, exposing the swollen testes protruding from between his hindlegs. He sniffed at her rear and secreted his own odor from his anal glands. From the scent, Samantha could tell he was the same age as her. Not only that, he was a *male*.

Suddenly, another dog fox bound into the clearing! He also looked underfed but was larger than the other dog. Older too, judging from his scent. His ears, whiskers and tail stood erect with the rest of his body. He was assertive though not yet aggressive, for the nature of these interlopers remained to be seen. A notion with which the younger dog seemed to agree. With their tails raised,

each dog sniffed the other's anus. When their scents betrayed their sexes, they curled their tails to the side, lowering their heads away from each other while flattening their ears and arching their backs. Crying hysterically, Samantha cowered all the more.

Lacking the facial muscles to snarl, the dog foxes let their jaws hang open as they let out aggressive gekkering sounds while circling each other. Most young foxes would back off, but the smaller dog had been dominant in his litter that year and was overconfident. He reared up to his hindlegs, as did the older dog. They held each other off with their forefeet, continuing to scream. After a few moments, the older dog successfully toppled the younger dog over. Instead of retreating, the young dog got up and shifted sideways towards the older dog, closing in whilst shielding himself with his tail.

Holding her ears and body low, Samantha whined with fear. In one fraction of her mind, reason returned. These foxes seem dangerous. Were they the monsters her dada warned her about? She should *run!* Yet another part of her was irresistibly drawn to strange smell wafting from these brutes. The scent tickled teasingly at the back of her brain, promising her a world of sweet indifference. A world where she could do anything she pleased, apathetic to the protests of her smooth-skinned father...

Suddenly, the smaller dog's tail struck the larger dog across the face! The smaller dog dove in to seize his rival by the neck! This strike procured him only a mouthful of the larger dog's tail as he shielded himself with it while dodging. Sparing not a second, the larger dog struck the smaller dog with his flank, overturning him easily. Determined, the younger dog reared up again, but before he could make it, the older dog dove in for a neck hold. The younger dog abruptly tried to change course, but as he was in the process of rising to his hind legs, the older dog's fangs inadvertently plunged into his rival's swollen testicles. The younger dog screamed in anguish, never having known such agony. Never one to release a hold once he had it, the older dog still shook the youngster viciously.

Samantha was close enough to witness this in as much detail as her eyes were capable of. The younger dog's tortured screams reverberated through her ears like the echoing cries of someone tumbling down a mineshaft. A miasma of terror, blood and urine overwhelmed her olfactory nerves as she clearly saw the younger dog's testicles *destroyed*, damning him to slow death from infection and blood loss. The traumatizing image burned its way into her brain forever, leaving the girl in a state of shock. Disassociated from her surroundings, Samantha watched blankly as the younger dog limped off with his body angled away, his mouth a gaping, constant scream. Time lost all meaning for that moment seemed to last forever.

Forever ended when the older dog fox pranced toward Samantha, his tail held high. Standing on rigid legs, he sniffed at the violet-scented black spot at the base of her tail. Satisfied, the dog fox urinated on Samantha, marking her as his own. The sensation jolted her back to reality and she recoiled. Confused and frightened, she tried to look him in the eyes to elicit sympathy. She found nothing in dog's vulpine stare but the blank indifference of nature. That's when he prepared to mount her.

"*Gek-gek-gek-gek-no-no-no-NO-NO-NO-NO-NO-O-O-O!*" screamed Samantha as she whipped around and bit the dog on the muzzle! Caught off-guard by the sudden forcefulness of her jaws, the dog fox recoiled, allowing Samantha to bolt off.

"Sammy NO LIKE! SAMMY NO LIKE!" she screamed, sounding just like the scared little girl she was.

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Back home, Samantha entered a crawlspace under the floorboards of the farmhouse. She laid by herself for a while, feeling sick, scared, and alone. Eventually, she grew thirsty and crawled out and approached a frozen puddle. Just as she was about to lick at it, she caught her reflection, as clear to her eyes as it could be at such close range. Samantha realized she looked like the fox who attempted to mount her. Facially, there wasn't anything to distinguish them.

"No! —gek-gek-gek-gek—No Sammy!" she shrieked with disgust. "Bad!—gek-gek-gek-gek!—**BAD!** Not drink like fox! Sammy *not* fox!"

With her pointy snout, Samantha struck at the puddle repeatedly until it broke. Instead of drinking the water below the ice, Samantha pushed herself up onto her hind legs and headed inside. Sitting at the kitchen table, Samantha poured herself a glass of water which she forced herself to hold in her hands as she drank from it.

"**WOW!**" barked Samantha. "Not to drink like fox! **WOW!** Sammy girl! **WOW-WOW-WOW!** Sammy ***GIRL!*** Sammy ***GIRL!***"

Yet given her physiology, Samantha still stuck her muzzle into the glass to lap at the water, and given the stress she was under, spilled far more than she drank.

Her mother and father arrived downstairs, alerted by her barking. Ruth was annoyed while Calvin was concerned.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Samantha let out vulpine whine and insisted that she was a human girl.

Ruth's demeanor changed. She picked up her daughter in her arms and rocked her like a baby. She spoke not a word of comfort, but to Samantha, cuddling close to her mama's bosom was comfort enough.

Chapter Four Summary:

It was the first of June, and Samantha worked hard planting seeds directly in the ground. She started with corn, cowpeas, and cucumbers, and followed that with pumpkins, squashes and gourds. Now she was finishing up with watermelon and sunflower seeds. The frost-free season had just begun but Samantha was already determined to make the most of it.

As she went about this task, Samantha thought about how the short growing season in Blackbird Peak mirrored her rate of development. The greyish white fur on her belly was now a glorious milk white, marking her maturity as a fully developed fox. Yet her growth had not stopped there. She continued growing a little taller and more humanoid each month, and was now inching towards four feet and eleven inches tall. When she stood on her hind legs it wasn't so difficult to see anymore. She first noticed she was getting bigger a few months after her parents taught her to use the bathroom properly instead of scent marking. It began with a pan on the ground, but eventually she started using the bathroom. When she used the toilet to begin with, it seemed massive, like she would fall in and the room around her was so huge, and her feet never seemed to touch the ground. Yet the room seemed to grow smaller and smaller until she noticed her feet touching the ground and she realized that she was in fact getting larger. Just over two years old at this point, Samantha's proportions were beginning to adhere more closely to those of a human teenager. While her hind legs remained vulpine, they too had grown stronger and larger to accommodate her additional height and weight as well as her increasingly humanoid torso. She had even begun to develop human breasts, eight of them to be precise. Thankfully, they were small enough that her fur and clothing kept them hidden. She wouldn't want to be seen as indecent.

Samantha's growth was not only physical. A sense of responsibility had emerged within her. With it, came the urge to earn her keep. Accordingly, Samantha's enclosure was now largely disused. Her chores have left her too busy to play much and she had been eating inside at the kitchen table ever since she proved that she could be good during her first winter.

Still feeling nervous around strangers, Samantha reflected on how she has mostly kept to herself since then. Nevertheless, she had taken more steps to be a girl. She made sure to always remain well-dressed and walk upright whenever she was required to go into town, which was usually just once a week for church. During these times, Samantha was polite, quiet, and well-behaved. Aside from reciting prayers with the rest of the congregation, she kept silent; never barking, whining, or shrieking. She only spoke when spoken to, and when she did, remained very polite and to-the-point, and not just because of her speech impediment.

In her private moments, Samantha admitted to herself that this was very difficult. Just the same, she made *extra* effort to seem human during these times in the interest of impressing Joseph, who she always noticed sitting next to Gloria during mass. Many townspeople said Joseph was dating Gloria, and while the boy denied it, he seemed to upset Gloria when he did so. She never said as much, but Samantha could smell it. She also identified Joseph by his salty-oily smell, although she found it was weaker when he was in church or spending time with Gloria. Occasionally, the townspeople commented on negatively on Joseph's smell, though Samantha could not understand why. If anything, she found it rather intoxicating.

Just like Joseph, Gloria had a scent all her own, and it was not just her sweet perfume. Unlike the wool or cotton scent of most clothing in Blackbird Peak, Samantha associated the rich scents of silk, velvet and lace with Gloria, which she wore even when she was not in church. Occasionally Gloria wore wool when out climbing trees or doing other fun things with Joseph, but she generally saved her nicest clothing for him.

Samantha never said anything about Gloria trespassing on her parents' farm, even though at this point she realized the "monster" Gloria brought was really her pet cat. Samantha kept quiet mainly because it would mean admitting she had confronted that cat, and whatever the circumstances, that could potentially make her look dangerous to the townspeople. Samantha also had no desire to make trouble for Gloria. Despite the attention she received from Joseph, Samantha had nothing inherently against the girl. She understood why her behavior towards the cat might lead Gloria to dislike her.

Gloria gave Samantha nasty glares, especially whenever when she caught her eyeing Joseph. Samantha could not usually make out Gloria's facial expressions, or even her natural scent through the heavy perfume and expensive clothing she wore. Despite that, she could *always* smell the anger wafting up from Gloria. She had no idea why Gloria felt so threatened by her. The fox-girl was too shy to talk to Joseph and merely went about her life in the hope that her good behavior would be noticed, and eventually, Joseph might approach her again. To be fair, she has had *some* success. Much to the chagrin of Gloria, Niimi would sometimes invite the McGimsies over to her house for tea after church. Samantha was too shy to say much to Joseph on these occasions. She didn't even really eat or drink while visiting, remembering how she looked to her parents that first time she tried. She had improved since then, but given her hated muzzle, she knew she would never completely get it right. The girl would loathe it if Joseph saw her eating like a fox.

Samantha finished planting the seeds, and stepped back to observe her work. This task would always be difficult given the wet, rocky terrain, yet her mother has been surprisingly successful at it, to the point that various creatures attempt to take advantage of their labors. These included groundhogs, insects... and the deer mouse she heard skittering about a few yards away, hidden in

out of view in the tall grass. Her ears twitched, detecting the creature's position. Then with a practiced grace, the fox-girl silently slipped to the ground, listening carefully for the mouse's position before pouncing. The crops remained unscathed as Samantha rose to her hind legs, swallowing her snack and resuming her duties.

The cows need milking, decided Samantha.

While she now understood not to attack farm animals and didn't have time to play in her enclosure, she instead had taken to catching pests around the farm as part of her daily duties. Her parents even encouraged it, and Samantha was unaware that this was not normal human girl behavior. As far as she was concerned, if her parents found her behavior disruptive or disgusting, then it was "bad" which to her, equated to being "animal." On the other hand, she didn't recognize hunting wild animals as "bad," because so long as it was not livestock, her parents didn't mind. After all, Calvin hunted himself, contributing to Samantha seeing it as a human activity, even though her methods of hunting were quite different to those of her father.

As Samantha finished her milking the cows, she reflected on how calm they were around her. This was not always the case. Given her scent, it took long for her to gain their trust.

Samantha reflected on the day she initially volunteered to help with farm work. Part of it was a desire simply to help, but she also wanted to volunteer in order to be more like her mother. Now that she had been tending to the farm work either by herself or with Calvin for the better part of this year, it was odd to recall that her mother was initially skeptical of her abilities. Samantha insisted, and last June, followed Ruth into a freshly ploughed field to help her sow seeds for the first time. Initially, Samantha started crying because the deadened scents make her feel lost and blind in a strange new place. Ruth had to kneel down to comfort Samantha with hugs, explaining it's the same field as always, the upturned earth has just eliminated the familiar smells. At this point, Ruth was ready to give up on Samantha, but she refused to let her, and soon she learned all about farming.

Little did Ruth know that training the fox-girl would prove invaluable, for just as Samantha started getting the hang of farm work, it became apparent that Ruth was pregnant again. Unlike her first pregnancy, this one featured no obvious complications, and generally speaking, Ruth's health has improved since Samantha came into the family. Nevertheless, Ruth was terrified she would lose her baby. It put both her and Calvin on edge, so Samantha started avoiding them, preferring to tend to the farm. This was of unforeseen benefit, given the fact Ruth believed she needed to take it easy for fear of losing this child. Samantha had her own fears regarding the pregnancy. Sometimes she wondered what would happen once they had a child who looked like them.

Samantha was jolted from thoughts when she heard Ruth screaming from the farmhouse. She entered to find that her mother had gone into labor. Samantha was terrified and approached, wanting to help. Calvin said something about needing Joseph's father Niimi. Upon hearing that, Samantha dropped to all fours to gain speed as she dashed into town faster than any human could.

.....

Gloria observed the tea set on the unpolished coffee table. It was cheap looking, yet the immaculate arrangement made up for it. And her company *more* than made up for it. Gloria smiled at Joseph as he filled her cup, his uncombed hair falling in his face as he did so. She admired the handsome features his rough skin conveyed, which she found as delicious as the tea.

Gloria had made sure to wear her finest clothes for today's little tea party. It was something she had insisted on doing more often since the McGimsies started getting such invites. Today, she was

doing so in secret. Gloria clarified that she told her father that she was “out with friends” when Niimi asked, so she was not technically lying.

Still, Niimi found that somewhat disconcerting as she had heard Phillip didn’t like them spending time together.

“Father has been putting his foot down more recently,” explained Gloria. “He thinks we might—”

Gloria realized what she was about to say and changed course to avoid being awkward.

“I mean, it’s... he has strict standards. It’s difficult to adhere to them.”

Joseph reflected for a moment. Then he said that reminded him of Samantha.

“I feel like I...” he began, then stopped himself. “I mean, I feel *bad* for her,” he corrected. “She’s been too humanized to make it in the wild, but she’s too wild to fit in around town.”

Careful to avoid saying anything that might make her look bad to Joseph, Gloria restrained herself. “I can’t imagine what it’s like,” she replied after taking a minute to consider how she should respond.

“Maybe *you* can’t, but...” Joseph paused again to reorganize his thoughts. “But... don’t you wish you could help her?”

Gloria restrained herself. She wished she could tell him she didn’t trust the creature, not since the night she met it a year ago. The way Gloria remembered events, the creature picked Mary up and threw her off the roof. The cat was sore for several days and had trouble sleeping. Gloria wanted to speak up to get her parents to do something about the creature but couldn’t without admitting she had trespassed on private property. She also didn’t want to admit her ordeal to Joseph, who clearly sympathized with the creature. Gloria speculated that was because the vulpine thing reminded him of his dogs. Why *else* would he have any sympathy for it?

Suddenly, there was a frantic chattering outside and scratching at the door. Gloria was unnerved, and grabbed hold of Joseph’s arm while Niimi went to answer the door. From outside, Gloria could hear the creature yelping and barking frantically. It was too high-strung to respond when Niimi demanded that it speak to her “with *words*.”

Joseph got up from his seat to assist his mother.

“What are you doing?” asked Gloria.

“I can get through to Samantha,” replied Joseph. “I know this stuff; it’ll be just like with my dogs.”

In spite of her distress, Gloria grinned a little when Joseph admitted that.

“What?” asked Joseph.

“Nothing,” replied Gloria, and reluctantly followed Joseph to the door.

Upon seeing the fox creature leaping around outside, Gloria recoiled a little and clutched Joseph’s arm. He pulled away and walked outside where he knelt down to meet the thing at eyelevel. He took its head in his hands and looked it in the eye soothingly. As the creature calmed, Joseph helped it up onto its hind legs.

“What’s wrong, Samantha?” asked Joseph.

“My mama—*kak-kak*—she sick!” retched the creature. “Sick with—*kak-kak-kak*—baby! Sick with baby! *Kak!* Baby coming—*kak-kak-kak*—baby coming *now!*”

The creature gestured to Niimi with a clawed hand as Gloria flinched, dreading the prospect that perhaps it would point to her.

“Need Mee-Teeg!” the creature finished, before it went back to screeching.

Upon hearing that, Niimi collected his supplies into a hastily prepared birth kit and headed to the farm with the creature. Joseph went along too, as he had been apprenticing under his father. Gloria followed, not wanting to leave Joseph alone with that... that *thing*.

.....

Samantha led the way back to the farmhouse. She initially ran ahead on all fours as it was quicker for her. After having to turn around and run back to the others several times, she resolved to completing the journey upright.

In the farmhouse, Ruth was under a lot of pain and stress, which in turn, put Joseph on edge. Especially as his mother expected him to help with the birth. Joseph was also shocked by the sight of Ruth's body, having never seen such a sight outside her medical books. Gloria was even more shocked by the sight of a pregnant woman than he was. She looked away in horror, turning pale and even hyperventilating like Ruth.

Joseph took that as an excuse to stop assisting his mother and to start comforting Gloria instead.

Niimi would have chided the boy for ignoring the task at hand, had it not been for Samantha. The fox-girl was not the least bit shocked by Ruth's body, and was already holding her mama's hand and licking her cheek to comfort her.

This impressed Niimi. Instead of ordering Joseph back to his duties, she spoke to Samantha.

"Can you get me some more blankets and cushioning, Samantha?" asked Niimi. "We need to help your mama into a more comfortable position."

With a dutiful yap at the only response, Samantha scamped off on all fours, and returned walking upright with blankets in her both her arms.

From that point on, Samantha followed Niimi's instructions to assist Ruth through her ordeal. Whether it was helping her mama change positions for the next stage of labor or simply applying pressure to Ruth's back to help ease her pain, Samantha did it all perfectly.

Samantha was even the one to deliver the baby. It was a rare en caul birth, and on instinct, Samantha bit open the baby's amniotic sac and ate the membranes within it.

Shocked gasps escaped the lips of Calvin and Niimi, prompting Gloria to turn and finally look in Ruth's direction once again.

"It's eating the baby!" she screamed.

Choking back vomit, Gloria fled the room as Samantha licked blood, vernix, and other fluid off the newborn. She only glanced up when she heard Joseph calling after Gloria. Samantha watched with her ears a-cock as the door closed behind him. She turned her gaze back to the newly cleansed infant, sniffing tentatively as her whiskers felt for any traces of afterbirth that needed to be cleaned.

"Samantha, you've done enough," insisted Niimi. "Give the baby to your father."

The firmness of the midwife's voice roused Samantha from her trance. All the same, she paused a moment longer to examine the new life she held in her hands. A faint memory flickered in the back of her mind, as ephemeral as an early morning scenting. Had she held a baby in her hands once before? Had she... *done* something to it? Something *bad*?

"Samantha, the baby," implored Calvin as he held his arms to her.

Yes, the baby! thought Samantha.

The fox-girl was content to let the memory escape like an unwanted shrew. She sniffed again, discerning the baby's gender with her nose as her whiskers continued brushing against the child's face, painting a perfect portrait of the infant's facial features. Meanwhile, the sensitive fur on and around Samantha's padded hands did the same for the child's body. This was a baby girl. What's more, this was a perfectly formed *human* girl.

“Samantha!” cried Ruth. She was weak, but found the energy to raise her voice to her adopted (*yes adopted, not real, not real...*) daughter.

Samantha’s ears fell flat, and, with a shiver that ran from the base of her brush to the tip of her tail, she passed the child to Calvin. This afforded her a glimpse of her clawed hands as they held the baby. At such close range, even Samantha could make out how sharply her furred, rough claws contrasted with the baby’s smooth, soft flesh.

Joseph was surprised how athletic Gloria was. He supposed fear had quickened her pace, but still, he couldn’t catch up to her until she arrived back in town.

There, he found Gloria raving to the townspeople that Samantha has devoured a baby. The younger children whimpered in terror. A pallor best befitting the grave even wormed its way into the faces of the adults.

“That’s ridiculous,” scoffed Joseph. “Samantha helped deliver the baby.”

“But I *saw* her,” swore Gloria.

Her eyes were wide and pleading. Joseph had never seen them so sincere. He reflected for a moment, and thought of the puppies he would sell to other children. After giving birth, his bitch Angel always cleaned the pups with her tongue, even going so far as to eat their birth sacs. While he found it off-putting when Samantha did it, he understood why. But how could he explain that to Gloria, much less the town? Few of them thought of her as human already. Even if they accepted his explanation, how would affect this disgusting act affect how they saw Samantha? And if they didn’t accept his explanation... well, that didn’t bare thinking.

“All Samantha did was help deliver the baby,” declared Joseph.

Had Gloria’s eyes widened any further, they would have fallen from their sockets.

“Why do you keep defending her?” she trembled, shock rather than indignation in her voice. “You saw just as well as I did that—”

“I saw nothing,” interrupted Joseph, not even looking at Gloria.

“Buh-but... I... I’m not—”

“Gloria’s a *liar*,” said one of the children, completing the thought for her.

Gloria stood there stunned. Joseph looked to the boy with confidence and then to the rest of the townspeople with the same expression. He didn’t say anything further because he didn’t need to. His demeanor said it all.

Townspeople spoke up. First one, then another. Their voices blended together but the sentiment remained the same. That spoiled rich brat—the most privileged person in town—was tearing down the girl (Gloria heard right, the *girl*) at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Amidst the jeers of the townspeople, Gloria stumbled back home alone. Joseph neither defended or comforted her. She wasn’t angry with him, nor indignant at the townspeople—or even Samantha for that matter. She just wanted to go home to Mary, so she could bury her face in her fur and hide the tears streaming from her eyes. Hide them where Joseph would never see.

Chapter Five Summary:

It was dawn on a morning near the end of June. Fledging sunlight bled through the trees, casting long shadows throughout the forest. The previous night’s storm had collected scents in the soil, now coaxed up by the rising sun. Among them was musky odor recalling cheap liquor smothered in perfume. Accompanying the musk was the metallic stench of freshly spilled blood. As if to

replace the evaporating moisture, it flowed from the body of a twelve-year-old girl. The blood gushed from large bite wound where her throat had once been, as well as the claw marks on her head and neck. Gabriel strode off in the opposite direction. Before disappearing into the pine trees, he stole a glance back the way he came. He could not discern the carnage he was leaving behind. To confirm the body was still there, he tested the wind with his nose when a scream interrupted him.

Gabriel turned his head back to the shrieking eight-month-old boy he carried. The boy was so tiny that Gabriel's clawed fingers seemed to surround him like pointed prison bars. While such rough hands were ill-fitted to the task of carrying an infant, they proved advantageous when he tumbled off that plateau two years ago. He slowed his momentum by scraping his claws against the rock face. While the impact of the lake below would have likely killed him anyway if the maiming on his way down didn't do so first, Gabriel got off with only scratches and a bruised kidney. This good fortune came about because, after a relatively short drop, he landed upon a ledge after already slowing his fall with his claws. Nevertheless, he lay unconscious for hours and it took weeks before his wounds healed enough for him to climb back up the ledge. He spent most of his time mostly resting, having to live off of any foolish, shrieking herring gulls who flew too—

The infant shrieked even *louder*, jolting Gabriel from his memories. Chiding himself for dawdling, Gabriel moved on.

.....

Earlier in the month, Samantha felt ambivalence toward Emily, as her parents had named the new arrival. It seemed like she was getting all the attention in her place. At the same time, Samantha felt an urge to take care of the child, the same as she did with her doll. For the first few weeks after Emily was born, Samantha kept clear of the baby and instead continued to look after Ruth's share of the farm work. She was sure that would prove she remained relevant to the family. Yet even with Samantha's help, Ruth grew exhausted taking care of Emily, almost as much as she did in trying to accommodate the fox-girl during her first year in the family.

Samantha sensed another opportunity to remain relevant one evening as she came inside after finishing her chores. She saw her worn, unkempt mother looking exasperated as she left the kitchen, putting dinner on hold in order to comfort the weeping infant yet again.

Deciding her mama needed a break, Samantha stepped in to play mama herself. Just as Ruth arrived, she leapt in front of her and her curled body around Emily like a blanket, while grooming the blonde hair already growing from the baby's head. In moments, the infant's cries subsided as she snuggled into Samantha's fur contently.

"Sammy love bay-bee!" declared Samantha, loudly enough for Calvin to hear.

Dada entered the room to see what was going on. Ruth stared at Samantha silently as Calvin chuckled and scratched under Samantha's chin, coaxing a little purr from the fox-girl.

"I'm not sure how I feel about this..." mumbled Ruth, her mouth a long, thin line.

"What do you mean? You wanted to cook dinner in peace. Sammy's seen to it that you can!"

"I did ask you to take care of Emily while I—"

"I've been helping with the baby just as much as you have and on top of doing the farm work you've shirked. If anyone's—"

"*Shirked?* Do you have any idea how hard I—"

Samantha uncoiled from around her sister and took off on all fours, distracting Calvin and Ruth.

"Now you've done it," groaned Calvin. "She was perfectly willing to take care of—"

Samantha returned with her old Christmas presents in her mouth, and dropped them before the infant before rising to her hind legs and staring up at her parents.

“No fight! No fight!” cried Samantha. “Sammy be good! Sammy take good care of bay-bee! Brought toys!”

Samantha fell back down to all fours, making eye contact with the baby.

“But no take dada shoe, Em-lee. That *bad!*”

Samantha turned back to her parents.

“Sammy good girl! Sammy good! Sammy good tee-cher! Teach baby be good!”

.....

Ruth was reluctant to accept this arrangement at first, but by the time she was ready to start doing farm work again, Samantha had proven herself so adept at looking after Emily that she often trusted her to keep an eye on the baby while she tended to her duties. Samantha and Emily spent hours outside while their mother farmed nearby.

On the same June morning that Gabriel carried off the screaming infant, Samantha brought mice and voles to her enclosure and plopped them before Emily. Now that she had a baby sister to look after, she finally had a use for the enclosure again, feeling it would be the perfect place to instruct the child in the fine art of pest control.

The baby stared impassively at the scurrying rodents before her while Samantha held her head and tail close to the ground, slowly swaying her head from side-to-side as stalked the creatures on all fours. When she decided to “notice” her prey, Samantha lifted her tail to maintain balance as she grew rigid. Then she leaned closer to a mouse she’d chosen to detect, inclining her ears forward before rearing back on her hind legs. Like a released spring, Samantha leapt into the air, her tail held to the side for counterbalance as she caught the mouse with her hands. Samantha didn’t kill it however. Instead, she released it and started nosing Emily.

“Now you!” barked Samantha, before her words broke into excited cackles. “Now you try! You try, you try, you try, you try—*ke-ke-ke-ke-ke!*”

Caught between Samantha and Emily, the mouse attempted to outwit them by remaining still. While Samantha was blind to it under such conditions, she knew it was there and kept nosing Emily to encourage her to leap at it. Although Emily could see the mouse before clearer than Samantha herself ever could, the baby did nothing more than stare at impassively and gurgle. Then sucking on her hand, Emily looked away.

Frustrated, Samantha killed the mouse and voles with a swift bite to the back of the neck. She did the same to the others, then cached them in holes she dug around the enclosure. Deciding that perhaps Emily needed smaller game like insects, Samantha lifted her sister with her mouth, positioning her jaws so she was holding her delicate cargo with only her back teeth. She carried her out of the enclosure to try and look for somewhere where she could stamp for beetles. There didn’t seem to be many in the ground in her enclosure, and as long as she didn’t do so around the crops, Samantha was certain their mama wouldn’t mind.

Upon finding a suitable spot, Samantha let Emily down and began to stamp at the ground. No sooner had she done so, when Emily started crawling away! The fox-girl yapped in defeat just as Ruth arrived. She gave Samantha a little start for the wet leaves masked her footfalls as she had approached from upwind of Samantha.

“You’re both getting dirty,” tsked Ruth upon seeing her daughters.

Ruth reached down to pick Emily up.

“Get inside and clean yourselves up... it’s almost time for church.”

Rearing up onto her hind legs, Samantha followed her mother inside on two feet.

.....

During the homily at mass, Father Brady asked his congregation to keep two young people in prayer: Marianna Lully and her baby brother Arthur. The children's father, Hugh Lully, was distraught as his children ran away last night.

"An event that seems to occur on the regular," Donna Chambers whispered.

In discussions outside the church following mass, Donna and the other mothers watched Hugh scuttling back home without talking to anyone.

The whispers of these women caught Samantha's ears as she stood a good many feet away with her parents as they chatted with Father Brady. At this distance, Samantha had difficulty discerning the woman as anything more than a mass of congregating blobs, yet she recognized each individual woman by their voices, even though they were too far away for her mama and dada to hear. In particular, Samantha had learned to recognize Donna by her patronizing tone. She knew Donna was Gloria's mother, and in spite of the attitude the woman's daughter had to her, Donna herself treated Samantha with supposed kindness. Samantha felt belittled all the same. It often felt like Donna was putting on a show to antagonize her daughter for some reason, and considered Samantha too dim to realize it.

The first time the McGimsies arrived at church with Emily, Donna publicly chided Gloria about the "awful gossip" she had spread about the fox-girl. Gloria practically sunk into the ground as Donna ensured everyone, "We certainly didn't bring her up to be that way."

Niimi took the opportunity to tell the town how helpful Samantha was in delivering the baby, that what Joseph said was the truth. She even joked that she considered giving Samantha some medical training, as it seemed like she'd benefit from it more than her son.

Samantha's ears had perked up.

"Sammy—*kak*—Sammy like idea," the fox-girl croaked in earnest.

Everyone was surprised that Samantha spoke without being direct prompted. They were even more surprised when Phillip Chambers said he thought it would be a "capital idea," and proceeded to goad Niimi into agreeing to teach her.

Niimi said she'd think about it, and upon hearing the idea taken seriously, Samantha could smell Gloria silently fuming. She noticed Gloria no longer sat with Joseph during mass, and she barely heard speaking to each other anymore. Yet Gloria kept an ever more watchful eye upon Samantha, like she was waiting for something to happen. It confused Samantha, as she hadn't really interacted with Joseph lately either. Her parents had made it clear that it was "bad" to clean the baby the way she had and Samantha felt mortified that Joseph had seen her doing so. She desperately wanted to talk to him but was afraid to approach her at church. She hoped that her family would be invited over for tea again soon to confirm she remained in his good graces. At the same time, she feared such an occasion just in case she'd learn she wasn't.

"I have it on good authority that since his wife passed away, old Hughie's taken to the bottle," claimed Donna.

Samantha realized her mind had been wandering, and intrigued by that nasty comment, she rotated her ears to hone in on Donna's voice. By listening, Samantha learned that Donna had little sympathy for Hugh, and was in fact, spreading rumors about him. Somehow, Samantha wasn't surprised, even though Donna had acted so upset that her daughter spread rumors about Samantha herself.

Donna said Hugh had become abusive to his children. According to her, Marianne had tried running away with Arthur several times to escape, but always ended up returning home. The idea made Samantha's heart hurt, but no one seemed interested rectifying the situation, not even the mothers discussing it. They were willing to criticize Hugh amongst one another, but they were just as willing to allow the abuse to go on unchallenged whenever Marianna returned. It didn't seem very Christian to Samantha. That was a trend she had noticed with these particular women.

Donna's references to abuse cast a dour mood over the other mothers. Gossiping about Hugh's failings as an alcoholic were one thing, but as a violence against children? That went too far. To change the subject, the women mentioned how the church picnic scheduled for today might be cancelled, due to the dampness from last night's rain.

"Cancelled?" fretted Donna. "But with young Marianna's disappearance, we need a diversion to lift our spirits!"

"With Marianna gone, isn't that all the more reason to—"

"Poppycock! We need—" declared Donna, who then glanced around until she saw the fox-girl. "*Samantha* needs a diversion."

From a distance, Samantha saw the mass of blurred blobs where the mothers' voices originated sharpened into several distinct forms as they approached her.

Soon they were close for her mother to hear Donna's voice as she fawned over "what a little mother" Samantha was. Meanwhile, Samantha hid behind Ruth, clutching the back of her skirt as she dipped her head down, flattened her ears against the side of her head, and curled her tail around her legs.

"Did she really deliver the baby?" asked Donna, her cloying tone making Samantha out to be more of a toy than a child.

"Yes Donna," sighed Ruth. "We've told you so several times now."

"Oh, of course," remarked Donna as she eyed Father Brady. "I just want to make sure it's fresh in everyone's minds. I heard that while there was some talk of cancelling the picnic due to the rain. But we simply *mustn't!* Samantha deserves a reward for all her good behavior."

"The grass is wet," replied the priest. "And until Marianna turns up, I also don't think—"

"We can place a shower curtain liner under the picnic blankets or sit at the tables," insisted Donna. "Please, we already cancelled *last* month's picnic when Donna ran away, yet she turned up by noon. And I don't think little Sammy's ever been to one."

"That's usually by choice," explained Ruth. "She's concerned that... well, she eats differently from other people. She doesn't want appear unladylike in—"

"Nonsense!" laughed Donna. "Why, I wish *my* daughter was as ladylike as your little Sammy."

It was then that Samantha realized Gloria was nowhere to be seen. She listened carefully but heard nothing. After lifting a hand to test the wind direction, she scented the air. Finally, Samantha picked up Gloria's perfume in a breeze from the west. Curiously, she could pick up traces of Joseph mixed in as well. This was the first time she smelled them together since Emily was born earlier that month. Samantha pointed her ears westward to listen and thought she could hear them arguing, but their voices were raised and her ears were more attuned to picking up low frequency sounds. Still, she could smell traces of tension through Gloria's heavy perfume, both in Joseph and Gloria herself.

"Samantha's been doing a lot of farming herself while I'm busy with the baby," continued Ruth, drawing Samantha's attention back to the conversation with Donna.

"Oh, come now Ruthie dear," chortled Donna. "Why not treat the girl?"

“Well, the grass isn’t *that* damp,” winced Father Brady. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll uh... I’ll let everyone know the picnic is still on, for anyone wishing to attend.”

“We’re all set then!” boasted Donna as the priest took off. “I can’t wait to see little Sammy there.”

“She’s still very nervous around strangers,” confessed Calvin.

“She attends church, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, but she doesn’t have to interact with...”

Samantha heard the priest speaking to Joseph. His voice remained westward but was closer now. Judging by the smell, Gloria was no longer by his side.

“I’d love to join you for the picnic,” said Joseph. “I think my mother and I even have some extra shower curtains in storage. We can lay them down for...”

“Sammy want go!” barked the fox-girl as she stepped out from behind Ruth.

Calvin and Ruth reluctantly acquiesced.

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At the picnic, Samantha considered approaching Joseph but felt too nervous. Instead, she stayed with her family and cuddled Emily. It was been a long time since Ruth’s had the opportunity to socialize for more than a few minutes after church, so she started mingling with the other mothers. Calvin did the same with his old drinking buddies.

Soon, Samantha was left babysitting Emily alone. This was the first time this had ever happened, so Samantha grew nervous. That nervousness spiked further when she noticed a single figure standing apart from the others and at a distance, yet faced her directly. The breeze carried the scents of sweet perfume and bitter hatred into Samantha’s nostrils. Even without the breeze, Samantha was sure she would have been able to feel, if not see, Gloria glaring at her from a distance.

Samantha reverted to all fours. Without even thinking about it, she started pacing back-and-forth in front of Emily. To ignore Gloria, Samantha focused all her senses on the baby. Every time the fox-girl passed Emily, she nudged her with her nose to make sure she was alright. Irrational fear built within the fox-girl. Had Emily eaten recently? Had she defecated? All the things Samantha would normally trust Ruth to take care of now felt like her responsibility. Her pacing grew all the more frantic, attracting the gazes of onlookers. Before anyone could say anything, Samantha vomited up her breakfast before Emily, concerned she may be hungry.

A scream of horror escaped Gloria’s mouth as she pointed in Samantha’s direction. Her cry was so exaggerated that even human ears should have been able to tell it was only partly genuine. The townspeople looked at Gloria, then observed that she was pointing at Samantha. Everyone saw the fox-girl crouched over Emily, mouth open wide with a puddle of regurgitated food at her feet.

Emily hasn’t eaten the sick! thought Samantha. *What if the baby had eaten too much? She could die!* Using her canines, the frantic fox-girl ripped off the baby’s diaper and opened her mouth wide to lick her genital and rectal area.

Before Samantha could do so, Ruth scrambled over, grabbed the fox-girl by her brush and jerked her away.

“**NO!**” cried Ruth.

Samantha yelped and whipped around, instinctively digging her teeth into Ruth’s arm!

Ruth screamed in pain. Samantha immediately recoils, realizing what she’s done.

“She’s going to eat the baby!” shouted Gloria, still and strident yet gleeful.

Despite Gloria's hysteria, Ruth did not retaliate against Samantha. She silently turned to Calvin as he rushed to her side and took a look at the nasty bite.

Holding her body to the ground and flattening her ears, Samantha tried to say she was sorry, but all she could do is whimper and whine. The sounds drew Ruth's gazes.

"Don't be—we shouldn't have—we knew you weren't—" stuttered Ruth.

Even if she had been able to complete a sentence, Ruth's words would have been lost. Not only amongst the cries of the townspeople, but the wailing of Emily. The baby cried hysterically at all the commotion.

Samantha remained frozen until Calvin reached out to pick up the baby. Fearing retaliation, Samantha bolted off, too afraid to realize she was running into the woods.

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Surrounded by trees, Samantha stopped running and started snapping at empty air with frustrated bitterness. It was then that she realized where she was. The forest seemed so different compared to the winter. Rather than frosted slopes of white, it was a warm boreal landscape. The breeze carried countless odors to her through the white spruce and radiant birch trees, blown from damp lowlands filled with swamps, bogs, fens and muskeg peatlands, which Samantha scented were decorated with orchids and pincher plants.

Tempted to follow the smells, Samantha didn't give in yet. She stood stiff and alert, back arched and teeth clenched as she sniffed for even a hint of fox nearby. Yet her nose picked the scents of what seemed like every animal except foxes drifting off the ground, including hares, deer, beavers, black bears, moose, and birds. The moisture rising from the soil clung to nearby trees and mixed with the oil on the rocks. It held scent well, rendering the forest an intoxicating wonderland. As Samantha relaxed upon realizing there were no foxes to fear, she felt her mind going blank again. The fox-girl welcomed the gradual release from her thoughts, and with it, all her guilt and frustration. Thinking only with her nose, she attempted to decide which line to follow. Spoilt for choice, Samantha wanted to investigate every odor, but whenever one seemed to lead too deeply into the woods, her reason returned. With it came a nervousness that led to her abandoning the line. Instead of committing to a scent, she trailed one and then another, constantly stopping and then starting again. Ironically, this just led Samantha deeper into the woods, albeit in a more aimless direction.

Upon realizing what was going on, Samantha turned her attention to the damp sedges and heath woodrush from which the smells were rising. Perhaps instead of trailing the scents, she could immerse herself in them another way? Without even removing her Sunday best, Samantha rubbed her body against the grass, inadvertently brushing aside the wet soil and vegetation carelessly hiding a shallow cache. Judging from the scent mark, it had been made by a young vixen, barely more than a yearling.

Protruding from the cache, Samantha saw the decaying leg of a hare. A forgotten memory stirred in the back of her mind; a hare leg had been brought to her as a plaything during her first few weeks of life. While she didn't remember those days consciously, she recognized the item as a toy and dug up the rest of the hare, which she found was missing its head. Although she wasn't hungry, Samantha found the scent of the rotting hare comforting. Tentatively, she picked it up with her jaws, tossed it into the air, then leapt up to catch it. She followed this up by shaking it in her jaws, throwing it again, and pouncing on it. Before she knew it, Samantha was rolling about in the hare carcass. The scent of rotting flesh made her feel warm and safe. She lay there rolling in it and felt the wind on her face she forgot the last of her anxiety as her mind went blank with bliss.

Walking softly on the wet grass, Samantha didn't hear Joseph approaching from behind her until his shoe scraped against a rock. The sound was almost imperceptible but Samantha immediately leapt to all fours, flattened her ears, curled her tail, and arched her back.

"Don't worry Sammy," said Joseph. "It's just me."

What began as a threatening gekker ended as a whimpering bark while Samantha backed away, not certain how much Joseph saw of her actions at the picnic.

"You think your parents are mad, right?" soothed Joseph. "They're not, I swear. They sent me out to go out looking for you. Your dada wanted to go himself, but your mama felt he should look after the baby while my mother treats her wound. They just wanna make sure you're okay."

Samantha relaxed a little, then lay flat on the grass facing Joseph.

"Sammy was scared," whimpered the fox-girl. "Thought she was in trouble."

"Well, you're not. Do you feel better now?"

"Yes," replied Samantha as she rolled around in the hare some more. "Found good smell, make Sammy feel—"

"Samantha, that's exactly the kind of thing that's going to get you in trouble around town," sighed Joseph.

The fox-girl abruptly stopped rolling in the animal carcass and laid down flat, resting her chin on her hands and staring up at Joseph with wide eyes.

"That *bad*?"

"It's *very* bad," nodded Joseph. "I don't think your parents have made it clear enough that this sort of thing is *never* okay. But it's why you're having problems fitting into—"

Suddenly stiff and alert, Samantha rose to all fours as she turned her head toward the trees.

"What is it?" asked Joseph.

"Sammy hear something. In woods. Running."

The fox-girl began flicking her ears. "Sammy think... Sammy hear baby? Baby crying?"

"Marianna and Arthur!" exclaimed Joseph.

"Too big for Marianna," replied Samantha. "But for sure baby crying!"

"Then we have to find him!" declared Joseph.

Samantha flicked her ears and her brush in agreement, and took off in the direction of the sound. It was weak, like perhaps the baby was tired or had gone hungry for too long, but as Samantha's ears were attuned to weaker noises, it in fact made it easier to follow. Joseph followed her over thin soil and bedrock, and past creeks and flower-laden muskegs as she listened heard the snapping of twigs and the fading cry of an infant. As she got closer, she thought she could hear panting breaths; not quite human but not quite animal either.

Finally, the sounds ceased.

Samantha paused; a single padded hand lifted as she stood still within the moss-carpeted maze that surrounded her. The fox-girl's eyes, usually little more than slits, were now wide with terror. The sounds had stopped too abruptly. The wind wasn't in her favor, she knew that much. Rather, it favored whatever she had been tracking. If she was correct and it wasn't Marianna carrying the baby, maybe it was something that could scent them like she could. Samantha shrank low to the ground at that thought.

"Samantha? Why'd you—"

"It knows," said the fox-girl. "Can scent us."

"Who? Marianna?"

"Not know who..." Samantha rose to her hind legs and turned to face Joseph with flattened ears and a curled tail. "Sammy scared."

“Are you saying it’s some kind of animal?”

“Sammy said not know! But went quiet, maybe ‘cause it—”

“Try your nose too!”

“But wind not—”

“If it’s been through here, it must have left *some* traces. C’mon Sammy. You were *sure* you heard a baby crying, right?”

Samantha didn’t respond with words, but strained with her ears to listen again. She picked up nothing. The fox-girl returned to all fours and sniffed around slowly, eliminating all the different scents that invaded her nostrils. The scents that had once made the forest seem like a playground now rendered it a labyrinth of conflicting trails. She ignored the wetlands and the animals. She sorted the mineral soil from the drops of blood that had seeped into the spot where an eagle has seized a snake.

Finally, she retreated from a rock that a lynx had scent marked. Joseph mistook this for Samantha gaining a lead. Not wanting to admit she hadn’t found anything, Samantha led Joseph through a small kame field that she worked her nose along carefully, as by now the sun had started to burn away its scents. Then on the breeze, Samantha picked up an odd scent she had never smelt before.

“Got something,” she said, the hairs creeping up along her back as though anticipating a battle. “Smells like dada’s grownup drink.”

“Alcohol?” asked Joseph.

“Only little,” continued Samantha, nose still reading the wind. “Also like smell Glo-ree-ah wears. Like both mixed. But also not.” Samantha crouched down a little and flattened her ears. “Smells *scary*.”

“Should we head back?” asked Joseph. “Get the grownups to—?”

“Nother smell!” barked Samantha and ran quicker as Joseph did his best to follow. “Like rot-teen fruit. Rot-teen fruit mixed with Glo-ree-ah’s smell!”

Joseph followed Samantha across a winding esker until they arrived before a smoky-green mass of spruce trees around which the sickly-sweet smell of death hovered. Samantha and Joseph stepped from sandy ridges into the grass, when they heard a feverish rustling coming from the bushes as something retreated. When they entered those bushes, they discovered Marianna’s corpse. It was it worse shape than it had been at dawn, for something other than just the blowflies had been at the body. It was covered with debris but that didn’t hide the fact that the meat around her flanks and behind her ribs had been devoured. She was also missing her lungs, liver and heart.

Samantha and Joseph fled back to town in terror. At first, the fox-girl led the way on all fours while Joseph thrashed through the forest like a wounded animal. Despite her terror, Samantha kept cycling back to make sure Joseph was safe and keeping up. Consequently, it was Joseph who arrived back in town first. The fox-girl trailed behind, listening carefully for anything sinister that may be creeping up on her precious human boy.

Samantha nevertheless heard the adults speaking long before Joseph did. Her dada was explaining to them that his “little Sammy” was merely stressed out at the picnic and reacting on instinct, both when she was trying to help— “not *eat*, that’s preposterous”—Emily, and when Ruth had yanked on her tail.

It was at that inopportune moment that Joseph interrupted the adults with ravings about Marianna’s half-devoured corpse. Initially, the adults were concerned that Samantha had killed Marianna then pursued Joseph back into town.

The boy explained that no, he found Samantha quickly and was in the middle of a conversation

with her when they heard something odd. Upon following strange smells located around the area where those sounds originated, they uncovered Marianna's body.

Joseph and Samantha led the authorities—along with Calvin and the other adults—back to Marianna's body. This only made things worse for the fox-girl. The officers demanded to know where Arthur was, implying that Samantha was responsible for Marianna's death.

Calvin insisted Samantha had been home all morning and night, then headed immediately to church with him and his wife. Judging from the condition of her corpse, Marianna had been dead since that morning at the earliest. What's more, something had been eating the remains—something that clearly wasn't fox, nor girl, nor both.

To prove it, Calvin examined the tracks left around Marianna. He demonstrated that the fox-girl's tracks were different from the ones leading toward the bushes. Samantha had one lobe on the front of her heel pad and two lobes on the rear. The tracks around Marianna's remains were rounder, left no claw marks, and had two lobes at the front of the heel pad and three at the back.

"Can you identify them?" asked an officer.

"I can't," admitted Calvin.

"What about these?" asked another officer, hand outstretched to another pair of tracks.

When Calvin lumbered over to where the officer pointed, his eyes widened until they resembled bleached marbles. These were coyote tracks... *large* bipedal coyote tracks, just like those he had witnessed over two years ago when he found—

Samantha's slits locked with the officer's pupils as he gestured to the tracks once again.

"They look like they could be—"

The officer never finished his sentence.

"There's *two* pairs of tracks?" quivered Joseph. "But that's like—"

Joseph placed a hand over his mouth to prevent the witch's name from escaping his lips. As though Myeengun had heard him, the air grew leaden and as crisp as a scorched leaf. Iron-black thunderheads fell over the sky in rhythm with Calvin's trembling hands while they fell over Joseph's shoulders.

"Like what, son?" he implored.

"I'm not supposed to say..." winced Joseph.

"It's something from those stories your mother tells, isn't it?" demanded Calvin.

Each hair along Calvin's neck stiffened; he started to sweat. The cold, wet streaks trickling from his brow mixed with the first drops of falling rain. For just a moment longer, the thunderheads loomed with bated breath, then came the rumbling of thunder; faint at first, but closing in as stealthily as a wild thing stalking its prey.

Joseph felt like running and looked back the way they had come, only to be faced with Samantha's bright yellow eyes. She looked sad and usually Joseph would have been able to recognize that, but under the circumstances, her gaze seemed more piercing than plaintive. It kept him nailed to the spot. Perhaps in search of relief, he turned back to Calvin's half-mad glare.

"My... my mother doesn't tell me the old stories. That's not allowed."

Calvin sucked in a breath before remembering that the authorities were present. Joseph's reticence was now clear.

"Of course, lad, of course..." Calvin muttered.

"I thought you didn't even believe that horseshit," grunted an officer.

"I, uh..." mumbled Calvin.

“I believe them enough to want to get out of here,” said another officer. “I’ve heard some nitchie say the witch or whatever it is can control the weather.”

Through the dry air and earthy scent that appears just before a rain, Samantha could smell the miasma of terror reeking up from everyone present. When the officer said the word “nitchie,” she could also smell a mixture of rage and sadness emanating from Joseph. It cut through his every other scent, stronger than even his fear.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” said Joseph, not betraying his emotions either through his tone or facial expressions. Only the fox-girl knew how he really felt.

Calvin nodded and grabbed Samantha and cradled her protectively. She’d grown a lot, but was still just small enough for him to carry. Even if she grew to be as big as Gabriel, she’d always be a baby to him.

The authorities hurriedly collected Marianna’s remains, ordering Calvin and Joseph to head back to town immediately.

“We gotta wrap this up, but you fellas get back, I don’t want any kids in these woods, ‘specially if something witchy’s goin’ on.”

Calvin hurried off with the scared, whimpering fox-girl clutched to his chest as she wrapped her arms around his neck while Joseph followed close behind.

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In the coming days, things were difficult for Samantha. Ruth was bandaged up and healing but seemed uncomfortable around the fox-girl. It was worse whenever Samantha was in the same room as Emily. Ruth never said as much, but whenever Samantha was near the baby, she could hear the tiny tremble in her mama’s voice and smell the slight changes in her scent. Even though she was a bit scared to be outside given what happened to Marianna, Samantha started spending the majority of each day in her enclosure to avoid her mama.

As it was built around the tree adjacent to the farmhouse, Samantha still overheard many of her parents’ conversations from inside. She learned that no one was allowed in the woods for fear of “The Thing.” Not even adults. The mayor mandated that they could only leave home for work, purchasing necessities, or to attend mass. Children weren’t permitted period, except once a week for church, as the adults believed it might ward off “The Thing in The Woods”.

On Friday, Calvin and Ruth were supposed to attend a meeting the town was having at the church, regarding The Thing. They just didn’t feel safe in the town hall and preferred to hold any extended conversations on hallowed ground.

Ruth was afraid to leave and attend the meeting. First of all, she didn’t want to bring Emily along nor lock her inside while they were gone. Both options seemed dangerous. Calvin also wanted to leave Samantha home alone. He believed the town would take the opportunity to associate her with “The Thing.”

Ruth argued that was a bad idea. After all, the McGimsies lived near the woods. The fox-girl seemed so exposed in her enclosure, yet insisted on remaining there no matter how many times Ruth forgave her. She would only come inside at night for bed, but at least while they were home, they could keep an eye on Samantha from the window. If they left to attend the meeting, who knows what horrors might emerge from within that fortress of pine, spruce, and fir... perhaps in search of any tasty fox-girls who had been left unattended...

Calvin disagreed. This led to an argument between Calvin and Ruth, which made Emily cry. It seemed that the McGimsies weren’t going to be attending the church, and thus, wouldn’t know what was said at the meeting.

That information seemed important to Samantha. Suddenly she got an idea! Desperate to continue feeling useful to her family, Samantha slipped out of her enclosure and ran to church, hoping to report back on the matter.

It was evening when Samantha arrived in town. Work was done for the day, but the townspeople still had a few hours before dark for the meeting. Despite the dangers that her discovery confirmed lurked within the woods, Samantha kept to the trees alongside the town to avoid detection. She did not bother keeping upwind of the humans and instead rotated her ears to detect if any were around in the city. Unless they were near and she had been rolling around in something smelly, she knew they could “see” her with their noses like she could see them with hers.

When Samantha saw the church, she departed the tree cover and snuck into the building through an open window at the rear. From there, she crawled onto the wooden support beams attached to the basement ceiling. There, she listened carefully as the men and women walked through the church crossing and took their seats at various pews.

To Samantha’s surprise, not everyone was part of the meeting upstairs. The children were led to the church basement to wait while the adults discussed matters, believed were too frightening for children. Nonetheless, the little ones had to come along too, as no one felt safe leaving them home alone.

The parents’ efforts to shield their children from knowledge about “The Thing,” but that did little good. In the basement, all the children whispered about what they heard had happened, many of them begging Joseph to share all the gory details.

“Was it another animal person?” asked one child.

Joseph was reluctant to share anything.

“I heard Samantha ran off into the woods and gobbled Marianna up!” interjected Gloria.

That finally prompted Joseph to respond.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” he snapped. “I had been there with Samantha the whole time she—”

“The *whole* time?” asked Gloria skeptically. “I thought you were in there looking for—”

“There were tracks, but they weren’t Sammy’s!” insisted Joseph. “The adults even said that they couldn’t identify—”

“My daddy said there was more than one pair of tracks,” piped up one little boy. “He said one was weird but the other was kinda like Sammy’s tracks, only bigger.”

Samantha listened from high up on the support beams, now angling her ears to hone in on the children instead of the adults above. She was careful to keep to the shadows and not to make the slightest sound. Nevertheless, she couldn’t stop herself from trembling when she heard them comparing her to The Thing.

“Yes, but, but they were bigger!” insisted Joseph. “So it wasn’t—”

“Okay, maybe it wasn’t Samantha,” interrupted Gloria. “But it was something *like* her, wasn’t it?”

Joseph didn’t know how to respond to that.

“From what you told me, there’re a lot of things like her in the woods,” continued Gloria, the corners of her mouth curled into a little grin. One might describe it as dainty if it weren’t so hateful. “The underwater panther, that deer lady...”

“Gloria, no!” cried Joseph with wide, panicked eyes. “I told you I’m not allowed to—I mean, I don’t know anything about—my mom wouldn’t—”

“Or how about Myeengun?” persisted Gloria. “She’s a lot like Saman—”

Joseph grabbed Gloria by the arm and yanked her close.

“Don’t say that name!” he shouted. Then in a hushed tone that only Gloria and Samantha could

hear, he added, “Please Gloria... I’m sorry we’ve been fighting, but please just stop... they sent me away so I wouldn’t know about that stuff... I never wanna go back... I’d still be there if it weren’t for Father Brad—”

“You turned the entire town against me,” whispered Gloria. “You *lied* for that *monster*. Do you know they things they say behind your back? I defend you, and you lie for that *thing*.”

Gloria looked to the other children.

“*Myeengun! Myeengun! Myeengun!*” she shouted.

From Joseph’s scent, Samantha could tell he wasn’t angry with Gloria. The thick stench of his terror clogged the room, spread by the boy’s broad, panicked motions. They left little room for any other feeling in his heart.

“Please Gloria, I’m sorry but... but just never say that name. *Please*. Especially not after—”

“Why not? You said it *plenty* when you told me his story.”

Now only the children gasped.

“We’re not supposed to even *know* the old stories!” cried a sixteen-year-old Ojibwe girl.

“How about that,” crooned Gloria. “I suppose I’m not the only one with a spot on her reputation now, am I Joseph?”

“That’s enough!” exclaimed Joseph. “I shouldn’t have told you that story, I—”

“No, you *should* have” interrupted a white boy. “You should have told us *all*, if you know something about some kind of child-eating fox whose—”

“Myeengun’s not a f—” began Joseph, before choking back the rest of his sentence.

“Oh, lookit that... we’ve said it again,” mocked Gloria. “And still nothing’s happened. If you’re too scared to tell the story, how about I handle it Joseph? Us kids have a right to know what’s eating us.”

“I...” began Joseph before all the fight poured out of him. “Do whatever you’re gonna do.”

“Thank you,” mocked Gloria, curtsying at Joseph sardonically before turning to the other children. “Once upon a time...” she began.

Chapter Six Summary:

Myeengun was born to an Ojibwe family living alongside Lake Superior back when it was known as gichi-gami. In those days, the Ojibwe were at war with the Sioux. To aid them, Gitchi Manitou—the traditional Ojibwe name for the Creator—decided they needed a champion. To this end, he chose a child named Myeengun.

Myeengun was a sickly boy who could not keep up with the other children. As a result, he was severely bullied. Myeengun would often be chased by bullies, who threw stones at him as he would trip and fall during his futile attempts to outdistance them. Despite this treatment, Myeengun was kind to animals. He would often rescue wild babies if their mothers met their fate before their young were old enough to fend for themselves. Deciding Myeengun had the compassion to avoid abusing his powers and that he needed to feel useful to his community, Gitchi Manitou chose him as the Ojibwe’s champion.

When fleeing the bullies, Myeengun would often fantasize about turning into an eagle or coyote so he could escape. One day after unwittingly receiving Gichi-Gami’s blessing, Myeengun leapt over a boulder as he ran from his tormenters. As he did so, he envisioned himself as an eagle. In that instant, Myeengun *transformed* into an eagle!

Confused and frightened, Myeengun flew all the way home and tried to seek comfort from his family, who—save for his elder brother—were the only ones ever to treat him with kindness.

Myeengun's family were afraid that an eagle was behaving so strangely. This hurt Myeengun's heart. To comfort himself, he envisioned the times his parents had held him in their arms after he had been chased by bullies. In this instant, the boy returned to his frail human form, to the shock and delight of both himself and his parents.

From that day forward, Myeengun knew he had a gift. If he ran while envisioning himself as a coyote, he would take that form and outdistance his tormentors easily. It was the same if he envisioned himself as a lynx, wolf, or even as a fox. Sometimes, if he stopped concentrating halfway between forms, he would become a hideous animal-human hybrid. At other times, he would take on characteristics of various animals, like an eagle-winged fox or a coyote that walked on the legs of a lynx.

Ironically, this just made the boy all the more feared and bullied. This was something his older brother relished, as he resented the extra attention their parents gave Myeengun as a result of his frailty. Myeengun's elder brother was a highly respected midewinini named Waagosh. His parents had never coddled him when he was bullied at Myeengun's age and he was never suddenly able to turn into an animal by visualizing it. He had to work to learn everything he knew. *Work hard.*

Seeking an excuse to rid himself of his brother forever, Waagosh initially deemed the boy a witch. That was until Gitchi Manitou appeared to him in a dream. Gitchi Manitou said that he had chosen the boy to keep their tribe safe, and that as a midewinini, it was Waagosh's duty to mentor Myeengun as he developed his abilities. Reluctantly, Waagosh did just that.

In time, Myeengun developed the ability to read minds and influence other peoples' thoughts and behavior. He chiefly did so through conjuring floating, glowing orbs. Each orb had its own colour and inspired different emotions. For instance, the blue orbs inspired fear, while the red ones inspired lust. Although he never used these abilities to their full capacity, Myeengun could also spread disease, destroy homes at will, and even disintegrate both humans and animals.

Outwardly, Waagosh attempted to appear content that Gitchi Manitou had chosen him to mentor Myeengun. However, he was secretly jealous that he was a mere Midewinini while his brother was already growing up to be a powerful shaman.

The Ojibwe were informed that Myeengun's gifts came from Gitchi Manitou, yet they feared the boy's magic all the same. They were concerned that—remembering how they once treated him—one day he might turn against them. Given his ability to read minds, Myeengun was well aware of this. Feeling like he'd always be an outsider no matter what, the first seeds of bitterness were sown within his heart. When the Sioux killed his parents in their attack leaving him only with his brother's company, Myeengun felt like his isolation was complete.

As he grew older, this changed. Myeengun befriended a young Ojibwe girl named Anwaatin. In return, he amused her with his magic. Myeengun developed romantic feelings for Anwaatin and she encouraged him to set aside his bitterness to focus on defending their people. Myeengun fell in love with Anwaatin, though he never admitted his feelings. This was because he read Anwaatin's mind and learned that she only had eyes for his brother, Waagosh. Myeengun reflected that he could use his orbs to literally change Anwaatin's mind, but opted not to. That would be a violation, and—at the time at least—Myeengun held to a strict moral code.

By that point, the Sioux increased their attacks on the Ojibwe. They relentlessly destroyed their food supply in an effort to starve them, going so far as to offer the neighboring Cree resources in exchange for killing Ojibwe livestock. Myeengun responded by using his abilities to spread sickness amongst the Sioux, but Waagosh ordered him to stop short of spreading fatal diseases. This frustrated Myeengun, because their enemies were too numerous and determined to let

nonlethal pestilence stop them. Instead, Myeengun began using his abilities to disintegrate the Sioux's food supply. However, their sheer numbers made this ineffective.

Myeengun wanted to escalate his attacks by disintegrating the enemy's leaders, but Waagosh denied him permission. Irritated, Myeengun demanded to know why, as the Ojibwe would kill their enemies in battle. Waagosh told Myeengun that while killing was okay for the rest of the tribe, if he broke this taboo, there would be no telling "what you might eventually do."

Hurt by his brother's mistrust, Myeengun confided in Anwaatin, who convinced him to obey Waagosh. Myeengun relegated himself to nonlethal attacks upon the Sioux, such as conjuring glowing blue orbs that inspired intense, irrational fear in the enemy.

Upon realizing that all the orbs did was inspire fear, the Sioux powered through it and continued capturing and killing Myeengun's people, as well burning their crops and slaughtering their livestock. Virtually all the elders and chiefs were killed this way, leaving the Ojibwe community lost and allowing Waagosh to use his status to seize control of the tribe.

The Sioux also had an additional (and very effective) technique that they used against the Ojibwe: bribery. They would provide any surrendering Ojibwe with food, clothing and shelter. Upon accepting these resources, the surrendering Ojibwe were shipped back across gichi-gami and incarcerated. Amongst the surrendering Ojibwe prisoners, was Anwaatin.

Waagosh wanted to lead the remaining Ojibwe north-east, hoping they might find sanctuary in an unpopulated plateau surrounded by a vast forest. However, many Ojibwe disagreed. They called this place *mamaanaabide*, for the jagged trees surrounding the open area at the center of the plateau resembled the long, crooked teeth of the windigo. Some believed that very creature and other evil entities lurked there, which is why it remained unpopulated. Others disagreed, and said that moving to *mamaanaabide* was their only chance at survival. This debate left the tribe divided.

Myeengun stepped forward and offered a different solution.

"I can use my abilities to free our people," he said. "If I demonstrate my power to its full extent, the Sioux will be too afraid to ever trouble us again."

"Don't," ordered Waagosh. "We've lost; fighting back further will only cost us more dearly."

Myeengun looked into Waagosh's heart. There, he saw that Waagosh was jealous; he wished that Gitchi Manitou saw fit to bless *him* with the gifts that had instead gone to Myeengun.

Myeengun took Waagosh aside and explained what he knew.

"That's why you didn't want me using my abilities to their full potential," protested Myeengun. "Even if it meant giving up our land—half our *people!*"

"Do you really care about them?" asked Waagosh. "Or is this really about getting Anwaatin back for yourself?"

"For *myself!*" screamed Myeengun. "She didn't love *me!* She loved *you!*"

A torrent of laughter spilled from Waagosh's lips.

"Did she now?" mocked Waagosh. "That explains a lot—although I wouldn't have wanted anything to do with that scraggy wretch. But go ahead. Save her if you want. When she's back, I'll have her just to smear it in your face."

Upon hearing that, Myeengun let out a *roar* and turned into a bear!

Waagosh fell to ground in terror. The bear changed again. His feet never touched the ground as he became an eagle in midflight. Without a word, the eagle flew off in the direction of gichi-gami.

"Myeengun? Myeengun *don't!*" called Waagosh. "I didn't mean it! You'll be disobeying my orders! You can't stop the Sioux without killing! If you kill, you'll prove you're a *witch!*"

The eagle ignored his brother and flew on.

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Upon arriving on the other side of gichi-gami, Myeengun took the form of a fox and snuck into the prison where the Sioux held the Ojibwe. There, he found that Anwaatin had died while incarcerated. Myeengun changed from a fox into a wolf and howled in agony, then became a huge wolf-bear-man.

The wolf-thing summoned his powers and destroyed the prison, freeing the surviving Ojibwe. To aid their escape, he spread sickness amongst the guards. Nevertheless, Myeengun's humanity—and perhaps his brother's words—stopped him short of employing anything lethal.

Given the sheer numbers of the Sioux, many were still able to attack, but Myeengun disintegrated their bows and arrows the same way he disintegrated their livestock. For a moment, he was tempted to disintegrate the guards themselves. He even started disintegrating a guard's hands along with his bow. Yet remembering what his brother told him, he stopped before doing irreversible damage. Instead, he conjured blue orbs to scare the guards away, a task his fearsome wolf-bear-man form helped along.

Victorious, Myeengun did not use his powers to kill his enemies or even take their land. He only used them to protect his people as they gathered into boats and traveled back across gichi-gami. Upon seeing that his people were gone, Myeengun led them north-east, reasoning that his brother must have led them to mamaanaabide.

Myeengun was correct, and upon arriving in mamaanaabide, the other Ojibwe initially celebrated Myeengun for returning their captured friends and relatives—until Waagosh arrived.

“Come with me,” ordered Waagosh. “Now.”

Waagosh led Myeengun deep into the woods. Neither spoke a word until they arrived at the rocky cliffs at the edge of the plateau, which overlooked a huge lake where the seagulls shrieked and the blackbirds flew.

Finally, Waagosh turned around and spoke. He berated Myeengun for daring to go against his orders.

Myeengun pointed out that he was able to rescue their people without spilling a single drop of blood.

Waagosh deflected that by insisting that the Sioux would now attack them in retaliation.

“All because of Anwaatin,” sneered Waagosh. “You doomed us over a traitor. If you ask me, everyone who surrendered got what they deserved.”

The hairs along Myeengun's neck rose as they grew out into a thick coat of fur. Without even realizing it, he became a diabolical mixture of wolf and man.

“Anwaatin's *dead!*” snarled the wolf-thing, voice neither human nor animal. “If you'd let me do something sooner, maybe I could have saved her! But this was *never* just about her! If I did nothing, *more* would—”

Waagosh spat right in Myeengun's face.

Myeengun reacted on instinct rather than reason. He snapped at his brother. The closing jaws nicked Waagosh's jowls as he stepped back to avoid those flesh-tearing fangs... stepped back over the edge of the plateau.

Waagosh didn't fall far. Myeengun was even able to climb down and retrieve him easily, only to find that his neck had been broken on one of the ledges.

.....

Myeengun brought Waagosh's body to the Ojibwe. Tears streamed from his eyes, which remained human even though he was still a twisted wolf-man. He opened his jaws to explain what happened,

but could only whimper like a wolf pup. From the neck up, he was a wolf save for his human eyes, though his body was mainly that of a human.

Perhaps if Myeengun had his say, things would have turned out differently. But the Ojibwe only saw a hideous wolf-man carrying the corpse of his brother. Whether it was rage or terror that motivated them, Myeengun was condemned to death by torture. Not by the chiefs—they were all dead—by the madness of the mob.

Myeengun refused to defend himself. He simply begged his tormentors to stop as they threw rocks at him like they did when he was a child. They weren't small stones this time, but large enough to break his bones and send him sprawling to the ground as he tried to change into an eagle and fly away.

In the twisted form of an eagle-wolf-man, Myeengun lay bloodied and broken on the ground. Still, he begged for them to stop. He found his pleas unheeded as he inadvertently morphed from animal-to-animal. Eventually, the tribe skinned Myeengun alive then callously dropped his hide down next to him. Myeengun's skin was now a freakish combination of wolf, eagle, fox, lynx, coyote and human being.

It was then that Myeengun had enough.

"You're not worth this," he muttered. "Nobody is."

The skinless amalgamation of beast and man cast a spell, healing his shattered bones as he rose to his feet. Then he used his magic to spread horrific, fatal diseases among his torturers. He also conjured orbs to exacerbate their fear as they vomited their insides out while their bodies broke down and decayed into cancerous messes. When he was finished, the Myeengun-thing picked up his own freakish skin and pulled it over his body. It hung there crookedly, like clothing a child hadn't quite grown into yet. The Myeengun-thing turned his attention to the surviving men, women and children; the ones who did not take part in his torture yet stood by and watched.

"If these woods are to be haunted, then so be it," said Myeengun. "I'll be your witch; your woodland haunter. Never speak my name and never venture into my domain. If you disobey me..."

Myeengun snatched up a screaming child and bit out his throat. Then he disappeared into the darkness of the woods.

Chapter Seven Summary:

"Now we call the town Blackbird Peak," finished Gloria. "But it's still the same woods. And it looks like Myeengun still haunts them."

The children stared at her in terror; especially the Ojibwe, who—with the exception of Joseph—were all at least sixteen years old.

"If he could change into any animal... does... does that explain why there were two pairs of tracks?" stammered a little white boy.

"Maybe," giggled Gloria. "It also makes you wonder if there's anything *else* like him out there. Maybe ol' Myeengun has agents... perhaps creatures like *Samantha*?"

Up on the support beams, the fox-girl couldn't suppress a whimper.

The sound was tiny. Nevertheless, it echoed through the large basement. Every child glanced up at the beams in fear, when—

The basement door suddenly opened!

Instead of concerning themselves with what was above, the children turned to scream at what lurked behind them.

It turned out to be Father Brady.

Up on the support beams, Samantha relaxed and silently gave thanks to God that she had gone unnoticed.

The priest told the children that their parents were ready to take them home. They had decided that both school and work would resume, but there would be a strict curfew and no one was allowed into the woods for any reason, not even to hunt.

“What about Arthur?” probed Joseph.

“Who?” asked one of the children.

“Marianna’s brother! He went missing too, but we never—”

“At the risk of sounding gruesome Joseph, considering how little was left of Marianna I think it’s to be expected that Arthur was entirely absent,” murmured Father Brady.

“Gloria said Myeengun’s the killer!” shouted a fifteen-year-old girl. “Is that true, or was it just an animal?”

“I’m not comfortable assigning a name to the assailant,” replied Father Brady. “But as a man of God, I feel confident in declaring it diabolical.”

“But what can we *do*?” implored Joseph.

“Our best bet is to avoid antagonizing the assailant,” continued Brady. “That means we keep to the town and pray for protection until the Lord smiles upon Blackbird Peak once more.”

Brady looked Joseph in the eye.

“Stories of these...assailants have been around since only your people lived here,” confessed Brady. “Yet this is the first trouble we’ve had with them. I believe we’ve simply let our faith subside. If we correct that, the woodland lurkers will surely return to dormancy.”

With that, the priest led the children upstairs. Joseph was the last to go, and stole a glance up at the shadowy support beams before he did so.

.....

Samantha crawled down from the support beams. She carried herself lightly, though her heart was heavy with questions. Was the story true? It wasn’t from the Bible, so she’d have to ask her mama if—

Samantha winced. Her mama didn’t seem to want her around recently. She thought more about the story, and true or not, a little part of her identified with Myeengun. Not because of how he was different, but because of how he was treated for being different.

Samantha had never reacted to a story this way before. She loved the fairy tales her father read her for pleasure and cherished the Bible stories her mother read her for education. But this was the first time she saw *herself* in a story. Though the events of Myeengun’s life did not parallel hers in any literal sense, the emotions she experienced were identical.

Except for the ending...

Samantha wondered about the example Myeengun set when he finally hardened his heart and struck down his tormentors. Is that what people who felt different always ended up doing? The fox-girl did not know, as thus far, she had no other story to compare to her own. If that was the case, why did God make them different in the first place?

Samantha ran her hands over her face again. The fur between her pads brushed every contour of her snout. Her fingers felt her pointed fangs and long snake of a tongue. Her palms enveloped her ears. In turn, her whiskers felt every inch of her hairy arms and clawed hands.

She was different, undeniably so. But why?

The fox-girl wanted an answer and she knew only God could give it to her. Rotating her ears carefully until she was satisfied that she only heard the scuttling of insects across the church floor

above, Samantha dashed upstairs on all fours, making nary a sound. Soon, she stood before the altar and asked the Lord Jesus—or rather, the sculpture of Him hanging from the chancel arch—why He made her this way.

Samantha received no answer from the stone-faced Christ.

At least not directly...

The church door opened behind the fox-girl. This time, she felt no fear for the outside air brought with it the scents of Joseph and Father Brady.

“I thought I heard you up on the support beams,” beamed Joseph.

“We also thought you needed some time alone however,” added the priest.

“Sammy feel veh-ree ‘lone.”

Samantha drooped her ears and curled her tails behind her legs. She raised both again as she turned to stare back up at her Lord.

“He no answer,” rasped the fox-girl. “Not like in Bibe-bull.”

Samantha ran her finger down her face as she turned back to Joseph and Brady.

“Sammy want know... why Sammy *look* bad?”

“You don’t necessarily look *bad*, Samantha,” comforted Joseph as he approached her. “You just look *different*. I mean, I look a bit different too. It’s nothing to be—”

“Why Sammy *act* bad?”

Joseph approached the fox-girl and stroked behind her ears.

“Look, I get why you bit your mama,” he said.

The fox-girl pulled back at first, then leaned in to his embrace. The sensation soothed her.

“You just got scared,” he continued. “We’ve been over that. And as for the other stuff... well, those are instincts that might *seem* natural to you, but they’re not. You can overcome them.”

“But *why*?” asked Sammy. “Why God give Sammy in-stinks if in-stinks bad?”

“God made everyone for a reason,” pointed out Brady. “You just have to figure out what that is.”

“Heard story,” Samantha coughed. “About Mee—mee—guh—kak! Mee—guh—kak-kak-kak!”

“It’s okay Sammy,” said Joseph. “We know what you mean. You’re not supposed to say his name anyway. You overheard Gloria’s story, what of it?”

“God have reason for him, boy in story. But boy not accept. Boy be *bad*! What if that only way? What if Glo-ree-ah be right?”

“There’re other stories Samantha,” laughed Joseph as he stopped scratching behind the fox-girl’s ears and started on her neck. “I mean, in my culture, we also have Asibikaashi. Don’t tell anyone I told you about her but, uh, she’s, ah, she’s part animal too. She helps mothers protect their children, she—”

The fox-girl’s ears perked up and she stood a little taller upon hearing that.

“Am-nal people protect chill-ren?” asked Samantha.

“Yeah, she’s part spider!” confirmed Joseph. “She helps mothers sew these charms that look like webs to protect children. When I was sent away to school, my mother snuck one along with me so I’d be safe.”

Samantha fell to all fours and leapt around, thrashing her brush and yapping.

“Sammy *like* story! *Kak-kak-kak!*” she declared. “Want more! More story! More story—*kak-kak-kak*—more story just like *that!*”

“I think I know just the thing Samantha,” offered Father Brady. “Follow me. There’s a book I can—”

“Sammy no can see pick-*churrs*,” said the fox-girl, the final word dissolving into a purr. The priest thought for a minute.
 “Come along anyway,” continued Brady. “I’ve got something else I can show you.”

.....

In the priest’s study, Joseph stood behind Samantha as Father Brady directed her to a painting hanging on the wall.

“No can see,” sighed the fox-girl. “Pick-*churrs* just smudges. Yellow-grey smudges.”
 “Don’t look at it,” said Brady. “Feel it.”

Samantha lifted her hands and the fur between her pads brushed against the contours of the oil paint. She could make out a form—not as distinct as it was when she held her sister, but she could make sense of it.

“Hoo-man?” purred Samantha. “Pick-*churr* of human?”

“Keep feeling it,” smiled the priest. “Lean in if you have to. Get your whiskers in there!”

Samantha obeyed and her whiskers revealed even more to her. This wasn’t just a painting of a human. This human had the head of a dog!

“*Like Sammy!*” the fox-girl enthused. “*Like Sammy! Like Sammy—ke-ke-ke--ke--ke!*”

Her sentence broke into a parade of cackles that lasted a full minute. After Samantha’s chattering subsided, the priest continued.

“I wouldn’t normally let anyone touch that painting,” he said. “It’s a rare Eastern Orthodox depiction of Saint Christopher. But I like to collect literature and artwork from other denominations. Other religions even.”

Brady smiled at Joseph.

“Personally, I believe the Lord reveals Himself in *all* cultures. I wish more of my brethren would accept that. Or at least tolerate it.”

Joseph looked uncomfortable.

“So, uh, Sammy, yeah, this is Saint Christopher,” the boy stuttered. “Have you heard his story before?”

Samantha shook her head while Joseph nodded.

“Well, uh, he used to, um... he....”

“He was once a warrior named Reprobus,” interjected Father Brady. “Known for his love of violence and power, he even turned his back on the King of the Canaanites in search of a greater master. None of the kings on Earth were extreme enough for him, so he courted Hell hoping to serve the Devil.”

Samantha’s ears drooped and she held her body low.

“Sammy no like,” she grumbled under her breath. “No like story.”

“But that’s not how it ends!” insisted Joseph.

“Not at all,” agreed Brady. “You see, after witnessing how even the Devil feared Christ, Reprobus dedicated himself to serving the Lord. This included controlling his violent instincts. To make sure he had, Christ even appeared to him disguised as a small boy needing help across a river. Reprobus didn’t hurt him. Instead, he carried the boy across the river on his shoulders. In the process, Christ changed from a boy into a man, revealing to Reprobus who he was.”

“Am-nal man protect boy-child?” chirped Samantha, her body and ears rising again.

“That he did,” replied Brady. “Christ rechristened him Christopher and tasked him with using his fearsome form to protect travelers from harm.

“He became a hero!” added Joseph.

Samantha thought about that for a moment. Then she let her mouth hang open in its constant gaping smile as she replied.

“That why God make Sammy? To be like spy-durr lady an’ Chris-toe-fer... to protect hoo-mans? ‘Specially chill-ren?”

As she said that, Samantha rotated her ears, remembering the cries of the baby she heard in the woods. The baby she now believed to be Arthur.

“I dunno,” said Joseph. “But, *uh*, but—”

“Some believe the Canaanites were in fact beast-men,” added the priest as he met Joseph’s gaze. “In the ninth century, the theologian Ratramnus wrote as much in his letters. Whether or not that’s the case, well, who can say for sure? But that’s true of all our beliefs. We have to take them on faith.”

Samantha reflected for a moment.

“Sammy have faith,” she concluded.

Joseph took Samantha’s head in his hands and started scratching behind her ears again.

“That’s a good girl!” declared Joseph. “I’m going to help you do what your parents can’t; I’m gonna help you to be human!”

“Sammy be hoo-man!” barked the fox-girl as she licked Joseph’s face.

The boy laughed as he ran his hands down her face.

“Okay, for starters, that’s very human. Got it?”

“Got it,” repeated Samantha dutifully. “Sammy be hoo-man!”

Memories flashed through her mind’s ears and nostrils: the fading screams of a baby and the part of the story where Saint Christopher protected the Christ Child.

“Sammy be *hero!*” she finished.

Chapter Eight Summary:

Samantha returned home, eager to update her mama and dada on the curfew. As she neared the farm, she smelt her parents’ panic on the air. She couldn’t see them but they were clearly moving around frantically in their search for her. Otherwise, their scents wouldn’t be so widespread, to the point that she could pick them up distinctly even though she wasn’t within eyeshot. Worried that mama and dada were upset with her for running off, Samantha veered closer to the trees. Perhaps returning with information wasn’t enough. Maybe they would still be upset at her for being a “bad girl.” It would take something *huge* to distract them now...

Samantha turned to face the forest.

...perhaps something *heroic*?

Samantha knew the forest was dangerous as she had been forbidden from entering even before Marianna was killed. But hadn’t Joseph and Father Brady taught her that she was a *special* human? (*That’s right! Special, not different. Certainly not an animal!*) God made her special so she could protect the other humans! If she returned home having rescued the baby that she heard crying (*it just had to be Arthur; God wouldn’t let anything bad happen to an innocent little baby*) she would prove she was a hero. Mama and dada would be *so* impressed that they wouldn’t feel anything but pride for their little Sammy!

Samantha headed back to the spot where Marianna’s body was discovered. The authorities had collected the body while the storm had done away with any lingering scents or tracks. In need of clues, Samantha rotated her ears and tested the air with her nose. Nothing human was forthcoming. The fox-girl remembered the direction she had heard the rustling and crying. She decided to head

that way, hoping she would uncover clues.

Eventually, Samantha got a whiff of something she had never smelt before. The closest thing she could compare it to was a male deer but the odor was not quite as strong or musky. It smelt more like the dust that collected around on the furniture whenever mama was too busy with Emily or the farm to keep house.

Samantha followed the scent deeper into the woods and thought she could smell a fire, cooking meat (*a groundhog, yum!*), and scent marks. The urine marking the trees and rocks was distinct from that of any other creature she had ever encountered, though Samantha understood it was left by a canine of some kind.

As she got closer to the smell, the wind gradually died down to nothing Samantha lost the trail. In general, the forest starting going quiet, as though the other animals avoided this territory. Samantha curled her tail and paused as she noticed how heavy the air had become. The general ambiance of the forest had lowered as well. Then she detected movement within a dense mountain ash thicket. Her slits zeroed in on its precise location as she lifted a single hand off the ground while her posture stiffened and she angled her ears toward the covert.

Samantha's mind went blank again as she surveyed the area to determine the best route to bolt off. Then from deeper in the thicket, she heard a cough. Her reason returned. The sound was frail, almost undetectable, but Samantha recognized it as a human infant. Likely a boy, though she'd have to get a good sniff in just to make sure. She considered approaching the mass of mountain ash to do just that, but judging from the rustling, whatever was within the thicket stood between her and the baby.

Samantha remained still, considering her options. The wind was no longer blowing, so if it was an animal in the covert, it likely couldn't scent her. It also wouldn't see her unless she moved, nor hear her unless she made a sound. Yet as the lurker remained still itself, Samantha couldn't see or hear it either. If the lurker was indeed an animal, the two creatures had reached a stalemate. Yet if it was a human standing amongst the mountain ash, that human could see *her*. What if a trap was set? What if the human carried a gun like her dada did?

As Samantha fretted with these thoughts, she unconsciously took a step back. While an ordinary fox would have loped off the moment it suspected danger, the fox-girl's human reasoning ability had betrayed her. That single step, though imperceptible to human ears, was more than enough to give her away to the lurker. A grey blur shot out from the mountain ash and loped toward her. Samantha was on all fours so she only caught a glimpse of hairy legs before a clawed hand seized her.

The claw held Samantha by the neck to prevent her from biting as it lifted her into the air. Soon, Samantha was staring down a narrow muzzle into a pair of golden-brown eyes. Somewhat slanted, they weren't all that different to hers but the pupils were round rather than ovals like. The lurker's erect ears also reminded Samantha of her own, even if generally, the lurker's face more closely resembled that of Joseph's dogs. This was not an exact equivalence, for its muzzle tapered more smoothly into its forehead in an almost elegant swoop, ill-suited to the panting tongue that fell past between the lurker's long, pointed canines.

At such close range, Samantha saw each fang clearly. Fear gushed from the fox-girl's scent glands and her own canines were exposed when she opened her mouth to scream.

"Myeengun!" she cried, speaking the witch's name correctly for the first time.

Reflecting sunlight glistened in the lurker's eyes and he (*yes, he, now she could scent his sex along with the wonderment pouring off him*) studied her. There was something attractive about his glittering gold eyes that tickled the back of her brain and made her head swim as his black irises

studied her the way the dog foxes did during her first winter.

Scenting Samantha's fear, the lurker loosened his grip on her neck and lowered her slightly.

"No," rasped the lurker. "Not... name not... not muh-guh-not-muuuuuh—not—"

The lurker struggled with Myeengun's name just as much as Samantha had, and in that instant, she knew this creature wasn't the witch.

"Name Gabe-ree-el," finished the lurker, placed his free hand to his chest giving up trying to pronounce the word the fox-girl stated. His speech was broken, throaty and rough. It was also slurred because, just like Samantha, he had to let his mouth hang open.

"Gabe-ree-el you," replied Samantha. "Sam-man-me... Sam-man...Sam-me! Sam-man-ah-me! Sam-me! Sam-me! Sa—"

"You Sammy?" retched Gabriel.

Samantha let out a yap rather than a proper response, but Gabriel recognized she meant "yes."

"Sammy same?" asked the coyote-boy as he took a few steps forward to show her that he could walk upright. "Same as Gab-ree-el?"

"Let Sammy down," replied the fox-girl. "Then Sammy show Gabe-ree-el!"

"Sammy friend?" asked Gabriel. "Sammy not to run 'way?"

In her mind's ear, Samantha remembered the baby coughing. There wasn't a chance she'd run before the child was safe within her molars.

"Uh-uh!" said the fox-girl. "Not run 'way! No! No! No! *Kak-kak-kak!*"

Samantha was patient despite how long it took for Gabriel let her hind legs settle upon the earth. It was another minute before he finally released his hold on her neck, his fingers seeming to come apart a millimeter at a time. Samantha remained still at first, then took a few tentative steps forward. The direction was strategic. She wanted Gabriel to feel confident that she wasn't backing off, but was instead here to stay. As Gabriel relaxed his posture, Samantha walked off to her left, then to her right. He observed her gait in astonishment and if his jaw wasn't already hanging open, it would have dropped.

This gave the fox-girl a boost of confidence. Within a few minutes, she was strutting from left to right. She got a better look at the seven-foot-tall coyote-boy during this time. His fur coat was principally a light, greyish brown through he had a creamy belly and jet-black guard hairs stuck out back and tail like spikes. Despite that, Samantha's eyes registered him as entirely grey. There were slight variations in the differing tones of his fur, but they blurred into nothingness as she drew farther from him to swagger literal circles around him. Her gestures were wide and open, while the circumference of the circles she walked grew gradually larger, edging closer and closer to the covert...

"What Sammy doing?" snorted Gabriel.

Samantha paused.

"What wrong?" she asked. "Gabe-ree-el no like?"

"That Gabe-ree-el home!"

"That good!" yapped the fox-girl. "Show Sammy!"

Gabriel lumbered past Samantha to block the entrance to the covert.

"Gabe-reel-el not want."

"Why Gabe-reel-el not want?"

"No can trust Sammy!"

"Said Sammy friend!"

Gabriel studied her.

"Where Sammy from?" he asked.

“From town,” acknowledged Samantha, deciding it best not to lie.

Gabriel crouched down on his knees to regard Samantha at her level.

“You have dada?” he asked.

“Yes. Sammy have nice dada and mama.”

“But dada not like us? Smooth skin man? Smooth skin man with gun?”

Samantha fell to all fours, her ears and tail low.

“How Gabe-ree-el know?” she asked.

Gabriel stood up with a start.

As no response was forthcoming, Samantha considered running under his legs. She could get into the covert for sure, probably reach the baby. But then where would she go? Gabriel would be waiting if she turned back. Keep running? He looked like he could probably catch up to her and she didn’t know the area.

“Sammy heard baby,” she confessed, rising back up onto her hind legs. “Back home, baby gone from town. Missing.”

“Come look-keen for baby?” guessed Gabriel.

“Yes. Why Gabe-ree-el have baby?”

“Found dead girl. Baby crying. Gabriel think... Gabriel help! Gabriel take care baby!”

Samantha was surprised that Gabriel admitted he knew about the dead girl. He clearly wasn’t Myeengun. Perhaps he did just happen upon Arthur after the witch had attacked Marianna?

Gabriel stepped aside, allowing Samantha to enter the covert. He turned to follow as she passed and the two entered a glade. Samantha smelled the groundhog cooking over a fire on the spit again and took in the human tools around the campsite but her slits immediately focused on the baby wiggling its hands in a pit.

The fox-girl fell to all fours and ran to the baby’s side. She coiled around his body like a blanket and licked his forehead before gnawing at the rope to free him.

Gabriel fell to all fours and loped up to the pit.

“What doing?” cried Gabriel.

“Baby sick!” exclaimed Samantha. “Need go home! Need dock-tor!”

Gabriel hung his head low.

“Or baby die?” he guessed.

“Yes,” murmured Samantha, surprised at Gabriel’s concern.

Gabriel stood up on his hind legs but stepped out of Samantha’s way.

“Sammy can take baby back,” said Gabriel. “But then Sammy come back to Gabe-ree-el! Live here!”

Samantha picked the baby up with her molars and climbed out of the pit on all fours. She set the child down briefly as she passed Gabriel, standing up on her hind legs to stare up at him.

“Why?” she asked.

“Gabe-reel-el all ‘lone,” he said. “Gabe-ree-el want friend.”

Gabriel knelt down again and picked the baby up, too weak at this point to cry or complain. He placed the child in Samantha’s arms carefully until she was carrying him the way a human mother would.

“Baby gift,” coughed Gabriel. “Baby off—” he took a moment to prepare himself for the complexity of this next word. “—off-her-reen of friend—” a cough “—ship.”

Samantha considered this. Gabriel clearly wasn’t a witch, but living out here, he might know more about the witch, especially as he had been able to avoid Myeengun for so long. She decided that as it was her job to protect the humans from Myeengun, returning to the woods to see Gabriel

wouldn't just be honoring their deal. It would be part of her Christian duty!

"Sammy come back," she said. "Not live to with Gabe-ree-el. But come back to play? Be friends?"

Gabriel considered her compromise.

"Sammy can ree-turn baby and come back to play," he agreed. "But not to tell town 'bout Gabe-ree-el. Sammy 'specially not to tell her dada."

"Sammy come back at night," she said. "Mama and dada *allllll* sleepy then."

Although Samantha remained upright, Gabriel fell to all fours to get closer to her level. He gave Samantha an affectionate little nudge with his snout and licked her the velvety back of her hand. He took a moment to stare longingly at the baby before giving him a little lick across his cheek and groomed a few ticks out of his hair. Then he turned and lumbered off a few feet, turning around to watch silently as Samantha left.

Walking upright, Samantha strode off with the baby in her arms.

"Thank you," she called back to the coyote-boy. "God bless."

Her back was turned when Gabriel called after her.

"God bless," he said.

REMAINING STORY BEATS:

1. Samantha arrives back in town with the baby, claiming to have found him before he starved. Joseph considers Samantha a hero for accomplishing this. Gloria says it is evidence that Samantha kidnapped the baby. After all, Samantha cannot provide a reasonable explanation for finding him alive. Half the town agree with Joseph. The other half find Gloria's concerns more credible and grow even more suspicious of Samantha. Just how did she avoid The Thing and how did she find the baby so easily?
2. Samantha starts staying inside again, which makes sneaking out harder because she's locked indoors. Samantha feels pent up, and worse yet, she knows she cannot honor her deal with Gabriel unless she disobeys her parents and risks losing their trust.
3. Samantha waits until her parents fall asleep at night and steals the key to unlock the doors without them hearing her, though she must tread lightly near their bed, right next to her mama as she reaches for the keys on the table...
4. Samantha retreats into the woods. It's very eerie and she fears bumping into the witch.
5. Samantha meets Gabriel who is excited to see her. He gives her some food: a hare he caught that he's cooking on the fire. Samantha is surprised and says she's never caught a hare before as they're too quick. As Gabriel gives her a leg to enjoy, he says they're normally too quick for him too but now that he has a friend, they can try "a special game."
6. Meanwhile that same night, Gloria and Joseph meet at a private place only the two of them know about. They once met here as friends to share private stories, but now meet to discuss how badly they've hurt each other. It's after curfew and Niimi has forbidden Joseph from seeing Gloria again since she revealed that she's been telling her son the old stories. However, Gloria's made an edict to Joseph that this is his last chance to put things right between them, which puts Joseph on the defensive. Gloria feels defensive herself. She must decide if she can forgive Joseph for ruining her reputation with the town and siding with Samantha. Joseph must decide if he can forgive Gloria for exposing the fact that he knows about his culture to get to him.

7. Joseph says that thanks to Gloria, he can never feel safe in town. Gloria justifies her behavior with, “Just because my parents have money, everyone acts like I think I’m better than them. But *I’m* the only person who doesn’t treat you any differently! Then that *thing* shows up, and no matter what, you side with it, even if that means giving them all another excuse to hate me!”
8. Joseph counters that by saying that he knows what it’s like to be hated by everyone too. The other people in town hate him because of his race, only valuing his opinion because he’s “Christian enough” to be a good example to the other indigenous people. But that’s not even the real reason why Father Brady was able to do what seemed impossible and get him out of residential school. He had been a “good boy” up until then, abandoning his birth name of Binesi and taking the Christian name Joseph. He observed the constant beatings other children endured at the hands of nuns but didn’t do anything until he heard his father had died. Then he began defending other children from the beatings. He made such a big nuisance of himself that when Father Brady stepped in and had him removed and relocated to Blackbird Peak for his mother’s sake, he was met with no objection.
9. Father Brady told Joseph that he had to make the extra effort to fit in, as to be accepted by the town, they must lead them to believe that he was released from residential school as an example to the Ojibwe in Blackbird Peak, not because of his behavior. Now that he’s back in Blackbird Peak, Joseph says his own elders hate him because of how assimilated he is, so he’s a traitor to them. “I know what it’s like to have everyone hate you, but do you know what it’s like to hate yourself?” he tells Gloria.
10. Joseph goes on to reveal he learned to hate himself at residential school because it showed him why his old culture was wrong, why they should follow Christ and forget their “pagan ways.” How he was like “a dog that just needed to be trained, just like Samantha is.” Joseph feels tempted back by his mother and even by Brady, who lets her teach him the only stories in secret, and while he feels drawn to them, he knows he can’t give in. He needs to bury the old ways to “be a good boy.”
11. Gloria realizes this is why he sides with Samantha. He wants her to learn to be “good” like he did, because he sees himself in her. Gloria tells Joseph that there’s nothing wrong with him or his culture, he can embrace both and the right people will love him for it. It’s then that she admits that, “I love you. All of you.” That only makes Joseph all the angrier. He admits he only hung around Gloria because “you were the whitest person I knew,” so she seemed like a positive influence. Gloria is horrified. Joseph says that “at least Samantha knows she’s bad. That means she can get better!” He commits to helping her learn to be “good” and declares that he’s through with Gloria. “From now on, it’ll be like we never knew each other.” Gloria calmly accepts that with, “Clearly I never did.”
12. Meanwhile, Samantha’s been catching hares with Gabriel. It goes well, with Gabriel able to catch hares more leisurely than he would otherwise as he trains Samantha to initially chase them to their burrows, while he hides nearby. Because hares must pause for a moment before entering the burrow, that’s when Gabriel leaps out to deliver a bite to their neck, after which they either die of shock or asphyxiation. Gabriel tells Samantha that alone, he would have to rely on sharp turns or hares who have been weakened by cold or other factors, but with her by his side, he can dine well every night.
13. Samantha feels conflicted about this as she’s “acting like an animal.” She even had to take off her clothing so it doesn’t get covered in blood or start to smell. On the other hand, she’s having a lot of fun. In fact, she’s having so much fun, she lost track of time and just now

realizes dusk is approaching. She also remembers she forgot to ask Gabriel about the witch! Kicking herself, she decides it's too late to ask now because her parents might wake up and realize she's missing.

14. Gabriel grabs Samantha's arm as she starts to leave, demanding she agree to come back again. Samantha makes that promise because Gabriel's sudden forcefulness puts her on edge.
15. Samantha dashes home and gets there just before her mother wakes up to start farming. When Ruth comes downstairs, she finds Samantha washing herself in the kitchen sink to get rid of the outside smells. Ruth asks Samantha what she's doing, and in crisis, Samantha claims she's washing herself to be more hygienic, "Like human girl!"
16. To Samantha's surprise, Ruth accepts this. She walks over and embraces Samantha, then helps dry her off with a towel and gives her the first cuddle that she has received since she bit her mother at the picnic. "Good girl," she says as she gives her a little kiss on the forehead and a nice scratch behind the ears. Samantha is shocked, then leans into the hug. The fox-girl purrs, but stops herself. She leaps down and puts on her dress. "Thank you, mama," she says as she gives Ruth a curtsy as she's seen other girls do.
17. Niimi goes to Father Brady and asks if he can talk the mayor into allowing her to perform a ritual that she believes will protect the town from "the evil" by putting it at rest once more. Father Brady says he's not sure he'll be able to convince the mayor to allow her to practice her culture as it could influence Joseph, and points out there are rumors amongst the children which indicate they know she tells him the old stories.
18. Niimi reminds Brady he agreed it's important to balance both cultures instead of choosing one over the other. Now it's more than just preserving their culture in the face of the government trying to kill it; it could save all their lives. Brady admits he disagrees and actually wonders if allowing Niimi to practice her culture in secret is wrong.
19. Niimi accuses Brady of only allowing her and her son to practice their culture as a means of partially placating them and thus maintain control more easily. In guilt, Brady says he'll see what he can do about allowing her to complete the ritual.
20. Joseph arrives at the McGimsie farm after school that day. Ruth tells him he'd better get back home as they need to be careful with the witch about. Joseph takes out the crucifix he's wearing from underneath his collar and dismissively tells her that "I'm protected," before explaining to her that he's here to see Samantha.
21. Ears perking up already as she listens to him from upstairs, Samantha squeals and scrambles to all fours before stopping herself from running downstairs immediately. Instead, she rears up on her hind legs, straightens her dress and preens her fur for a moment before walking downstairs in a ladylike manner.
22. Joseph explains he wants to spend more time with Samantha because he thinks he can help her out. He says he thinks he can even teach her to read. Ruth sighs, and explains that Samantha's a bit sensitive about that, as it's hard for her to see. Joseph says he knows that but he has special books at the church that they can use. He asks Samantha to come with him to study at church between the end of school to just before curfew. Ruth is reluctant but Samantha wants to go. Calvin is listening in as he has coffee, and tells Ruth he thinks learning to read would be really good for Samantha. Ruth still says no, but this time

Samantha accepts her decision like a good girl. Ruth was expecting another temper tantrum out of Samantha. Impressed by her maturity, she changes her mind and allows Samantha to go study with Joseph.

23. Joseph takes Samantha to church where he reveals to her that Father Brady found some brail books which he explains are used by blind people to read. He's taken it upon himself to teach her to read herself using them. Brady supervises them as Joseph teaches Samantha to read using *The Frog Prince*, her favorite tale. He says he wants to teach her *Pinocchio* next, which he thinks Samantha will also like because it has a similar ending to *The Frog Prince*.
24. Samantha cannot read well enough on her own to try a novel, so she begs Joseph to describe *Pinocchio* to her over some tea and biscuits that Brady makes for them. When they get to the end, Samantha asks if The Fairy with Turquoise Hair is an angel in service to God, given she is able to protect Pinocchio and grant his wish of becoming human.
25. Before Joseph or Brady can answer Samantha, Niimi appears in "strange garb" and interrupts them. This prompts Brady to abruptly leave with her. Samantha asks Joseph what's going on and he explains he's not sure, but he doesn't care as he wanted to speak to Samantha in private anyway. He says he didn't just want to teach her to read, that was Brady's idea, but he accepted the job as he wanted to teach her other things too. He says he wants to spend more time with her so he can teach her to be human because she's not doing so on her own, and her parents aren't doing a good enough job.
26. Samantha feels conflicted as she is always tempted to act like an animal and knows she must indulge that side of herself to please Gabriel. But she also knows half the town is still against her so she'll need to appear as human as she can in order to win them over. Therefore, Samantha agrees, deciding God wants her to be more human just like He wanted *Pinocchio* to be a real boy. "Joseph be Sammy's angel!" she declares.
27. Joseph smiles at Samantha, takes off his crucifix and gives it to her, wanting the fox-girl to keep it. Samantha puts on the crucifix and wears it consistently from that point on. She also takes *The Frog Prince* book home with her, so she can practice with it there... and have access to her favorite book.
28. Brady is a little concerned about Niimi being seen by Samantha but she thinks it's silly as she doubts Samantha even understands why she's dressed the way she is. It's unlikely Joseph will say anything. Brady reluctantly agrees but wants to make sure the town doesn't know about the ritual they're engaged in. While Niimi insists what they're doing is in as much service to God as any Catholic ceremony, the town will consider it pagan, or worse yet, Satanic. So, while he wants to allow Niimi to perform a ritual to hopefully return Myeengun to dormancy, he must take credit for it.
29. During the ritual, Brady thinks he notices something scuttling through the woods. Thinking it might be the witch, Brady and Niimi follow, but it's too late to get a good look at whatever it was. Suddenly, they thing turns back and seems to run toward them through the foliage, shocking Brady into tumbling over and dropping the light, which goes out! Niimi could run and leave Brady to die but then the ritual would go uncompleted and she's not even sure it will work. Niimi chooses to stay and stands between Brady and whatever the thing is as she completes the ritual.

30. The thing runs away, leaving Niimi proud and confident that she's driven Myeengun off—except it turns out “Myeengun” is just Samantha sneaking off into the woods to see Gabriel, though neither Niimi nor Brady know that.
31. In her unwitting altercation, Samantha had to go back to get her brail book after dropping it when Niimi and Brady surprised her. As they were upwind of her, she thought they were witches until she heard their voices as she retreated with the book. Samantha is relieved that, from the sounds of it, Niimi and Brady have no idea that “The Thing” was really a fox-girl.
32. Samantha reflects on how she brought the brail book with her because she wants to show it to Gabriel as a conversation starter in order to get them sharing stories—perhaps he'll tell her anything he knows about the witch. Samantha finds Gabriel, who decided not to hunt tonight as he has plenty of hares from last night to share with her. She tries to talk to him, but initially he just wants to play with her on all fours, using the leftover rabbit parts and bones as toys. Samantha is tempted, but after a little playtime, coaxes him over to where she put down her book.
33. Gabriel is initially fascinated by the book and says he remembers that such items contain stories, even though he was never able to see well enough to read them himself. He wants Samantha to read him the story, but as she has only one day's experience with brail, she offers to tell Gabriel the story from memory instead. Gabriel asks her to wait, then cuddles up with a tattered stuffed elephant that he keeps shoved in his knapsack. Once he's curled up, Samantha tells the tale.
34. After hearing the story, Samantha asks Gabriel if he knows any other stories about people becoming animals, hoping it will prod him to open up about Myeengun and how he's been able to avoid him.
35. Gabriel thinks for a moment. He says he doesn't know many animal stories, but he does know the story of the windigo, and how he used to fear the woods in case it gobbled him up. Intrigued, Samantha suspects a windigo might be some other word for a witch. She asks Gabriel to tell her the story. Gabriel spins a yarn about a group of children who got lost during the winter, including one who was bullied for being overweight. This boy ended up lasting the longest, first on the fat he had stored up, then on eating the bodies of the other boys who had starved to death. Eventually, the boy started killing the surviving children for food. The boy ended as an emaciated shell of himself, “a windigo!” Gabriel explains that he was taught this story to instill in him the idea that eating human flesh is the worst sin a person can commit. It leaves you cut off from your humanity and as nothing more than a windigo, forever cursed to feed your hunger but never sustaining yourself enough to put meat on your bones.
36. Samantha asks if Gabriel saw a windigo taking the baby or if it was Myeengun, and also what he did to get rid of either. Gabriel thinks for a moment, then says it was neither. Instead, the worst monster he ever saw was standing over the girl's corpse: a furry, four-legged beast with razor sharp fangs and teeth. He heard the baby crying and managed to scare the creature off by hurling rocks at it and screaming while standing tall and facing it directly. He was too slow to save the girl's life, but he was able to grab baby Arthur and

- hurry off with him in hand. The scent of blood made Gabriel want to scavenge the girl's body, but he stopped himself, remembering the windigo story.
37. Samantha wonders if perhaps *Gabriel* is a windigo and Marianna's killer. Perhaps he is trying to deny that aspect of himself by describing it as a separate creature that only walks on all fours. Gabriel does seem to go into a completely different state when hunting where he acts mainly on instinct. Without thinking about it, Samantha's hackles rise and her tail curls as her eyes survey the landscape for a possible exit...
 38. "Getting late," Samantha finally says. "Sun up soon. Sammy go home." Gabriel allows Samantha to leave.
 39. Father Brady calls another meeting, saying he's had a "message from God," claiming that if they all go to the woods and pray, the witch will be vanquished. Niimi seems a bit hurt by all this but says nothing. Only Samantha is really able to pick up on it due to subtle changes in Niimi's scent.
 40. For protection, the men bring their hunting dogs into the woods as they pray. When one dog gets a whiff of Samantha, he gives chase. Samantha instinctively flees but winds up nearly running into the crowd and knocking Gloria over, but she swerves out of the way in time to avoid impact.
 41. The dog continues barreling forward even after Samantha swerves away. Unable to stop himself in time, the dog would take a bite out of Gloria, but Samantha body slams the dog, knocking him over. When the dog gets up, Samantha stands between him and Gloria as she gekkers at the dog, just as she gekkered at Gloria's cat. This demonstrates to Gloria that she misinterpreted Samantha earlier.
 42. Chaos ensues with all the dogs going wild due to the conflict with Samantha. After their owners calm them down and collect them, they say Samantha should not be included in the prayers because she is disruptive. Without a word of protest or hesitation, Samantha starts leaving when Gloria offers to walk her back home. The McGimsies say they'll have to escort Samantha back instead, but Gloria insists she come along too as she wants to talk to Samantha. Sensing a change in Gloria, Ruth allows her to come.
 43. Ruth and Calvin follow the girls from a short distance to allow Gloria and Samantha to talk about what happened, finally speaking to each other as human beings. Samantha realizes that she and Gloria remember the incident with the cat differently, which plants the seed in Samantha's mind that memories can be unreliable.
 44. On their way back home, Joseph catches up with Samantha and Gloria. He seems oddly confident that everything's been dealt with, prayers or no prayers. When Samantha asks why, Joseph cuts her off with a lecture on how Samantha was acting like an animal again. "She needs to learn to get along with dogs like a human would!" This leads to an argument with Gloria, who points out the dogs attacked Samantha first, and Samantha in fact defended her.
 45. The McGimsies intervene and invite Joseph and Gloria back for dinner as it's getting dark out. Things seem dangerous, necessitating both Joseph and Gloria to spend the night despite arguing over what's right for Samantha and Niimi not knowing where he is.
 46. Now Samantha has two arguing houseguests, and must escape the house that night to see Gabriel or he'll be mad! Samantha narrowly avoids being spotted but Gloria sees her just as she's about to slip off. Samantha will not tell Gloria where she's going, but Gloria

decides to trust Samantha's explanation that "it's important and part of God's plan" so she doesn't tell on her.

47. Samantha arrives to play with Gabriel that night. He wants to hunt animals near the wetlands as it's something different from hunting hares. Samantha goes along with it at first, but balks at killing a frog in case it might be a prince. Gabriel asks if she really believes that story was true, and she says she does because it symbolizes how we can all change for the better. Gabriel says that's silly, but respects her choice and asks what other games they can play.
48. Samantha responds by getting him to pretend to play with her by rolling around together, supposedly ignoring some deer they scent nearby. The deer are young enough that they're still playing together, but old enough that Gabriel considers them adults, which is important to him in a way it's not important to Samantha. Her playful rolling tempts the deer into approaching them, and allows Samantha to kill them by crouching still on the grass when they get close enough, then leaping up and biting into their necks.
49. Samantha explains this technique has worked when birds landed on her mama and dada's farm and she wanted to see if it would work on deer too. Gabriel says it never occurred to him that would work as playing like that seemed too much like an animal. This shows Samantha's value to Gabriel as she has a technique to get them to come close instead of having to rely on luck. Gabriel wonders if Samantha is really *like* him or if he's different and he should become more like *her*.
50. Gabriel realizes this makes Samantha more animal than he is based on her techniques, so he resolves to bring out the animal in her even more. He says Samantha is more like an animal than a girl which visibly upsets her. "No, that good thing," says Gabriel, as it allows them to eat better. Samantha is clearly uncomfortable but doesn't say so.
51. Back home, Joseph pushes Samantha in the opposite direction. Now that the community considers the witch situation put to rest, he decides to teach Samantha to hunt like a human, and that includes using dogs. He hopes this will socialize Samantha to them as they gradually learn to recognize her individual scent instead of registering her as a fox. Samantha is interested, as her father is a hunter, but admits she is not allowed into the forest, so she could never learn from him. Therefore, she'll have to keep this secret. Niimi says that's fine, as the details of her hunts with Joseph should be kept secret as well.
52. On the hunts, Joseph teaches Samantha how do fun activities like make rope, bows and arrows from scratch in the woods, as well as fire them. In these moments, Samantha realizes that Joseph is indulging in his own culture, which is the secret Niimi wanted kept. She realizes he's lost a crucial part of his identity by suppressing it to please the settlers in Blackbird Peak. Samantha feels bad for both of them, though she does not yet fully make the connection between Joseph suppressing his culture and her own suppression of her instincts.
53. When Samantha visits Joseph to learn how to read, we see Niimi training him to be a physician as well. Niimi allows Samantha to join in on these lessons, which consist not only of the current European techniques, but also Ojibwe techniques.
54. Given all this activity, Samantha's always tired and asks Gabriel if she can only visit him every other night. When Gabriel asks her why she needs to be up during the day, she says it's to help with farm work, but he can tell from her scent that she's not telling him the whole story. Instead of outright saying no, Gabriel agrees then follows her back to the farm

- the next morning. He watches her feign an interest in typical “girl” activities, like knitting and continuing to help her mother around the farm.
55. Careful to keep upwind of Samantha and to eliminate his scent as much as possible, Gabriel watches as Joseph arrives to spend time with her. He teaches Samantha to act “ladylike” and “Christian,” pointing out whenever she does anything animalistic, so she learns to stop.
 56. That night, Samantha sneaks out again but catches traces of Gabriel’s scent despite his efforts to mask it. This reveals that not only did Gabriel follow her, he didn’t want her to know he did. Nervous, Samantha turns back and heads home. As she’s stressed, she makes more noise than she otherwise would, and wakes up Emily who starts crying. Ruth and Calvin come to comfort Emily and see Samantha with the keys.
 57. Gabriel grows angry that Samantha hasn’t come to play and heads to the farm to see where she is. He begins chasing livestock and even killing a sheep to get her attention. Calvin leaves the house with his gun. Gabriel runs away without dragging off the sheep.
 58. Calvin doesn’t see Gabriel, but upon investigating, he does notice Gabriel’s tracks leading away. He recognizes them instantly and realizes what’s going on...the coyote-boy *lives!*
 59. Inside, Ruth questions Samantha on why she was trying to sneak out but Samantha remains tight-lipped. When Ruth notices Calvin’s returned, she asks him what was outside. Calvin says a wolf killed one of their sheep but ran off upon seeing him.
 60. Ruth can tell Calvin’s being evasive but the attention is now on him, Calvin offers Samantha a way out. “Is that why you tried to get outside Sammy?” he asks. “Did you hear something; did you want to protect us?” Ruth doesn’t buy it. “If she heard something, she could have told us” Ruth says.
 61. Samantha can tell Calvin is lying to cover for her. She knows lying is wrong but she also doesn’t want to reveal the truth because she’ll get in trouble. All she can do is whine and cry like an animal, too stressed to form real words.
 62. Ruth decides it’s best they all get some sleep and figure out how to proceed in the morning. However, they make sure Samantha sleeps between her mama and dada in their bed so she can’t sneak off again without waking them. Samantha does not mind so much, as she feels safer all cuddled up with her parents.
 63. Before Ruth wakes up, Calvin gently nudges Samantha so she knows it’s him, then covers her muzzle with his hand, lifts her up, and gently carries her downstairs and outside without waking Ruth.
 64. Outside, Calvin shows Samantha Gabriel’s tracks. The sun is just starting to rise as Calvin asks, “Do you know who made these?” Samantha sniffs the prints and decides not to lie. “Belong to Gabe-ree-el,” she whines as she looks up at her father. “Gabe-ree-el like Sammy,” she continues, as she pulls on her tail and runs her hands over her face. Calvin looks grave. “That’s what I thought,” he says. “This was never some ‘witch.’ That coyote-boy somehow survived; he killed the Lully girl too.”
 65. Samantha asks Calvin what he knows of Gabriel. Calvin finally tells her the complete story of how he found her. Samantha is devastated. Now she has even more questions she wants to ask Gabriel, wondering if they’re perhaps related. But Calvin bans her from ever speaking to him again. No one can know a creature like Samantha is responsible for Marianna’s death, or it will make Samantha look even worse. Perhaps they shouldn’t even tell Ruth.
 66. Samantha points out that there were two sets of tracks around the body. “Could have been from other animal,” she says. Samantha goes on to ask how they know that animal wasn’t the one that attacked...maybe it was even the witch in animal form! Calvin tells Samantha

to drop it, then instructs her to tell Ruth that she had been sneaking out to play at night because she felt pent up inside due to curfew. “But you have to make sure you say you were going out to play *alone!* Then when you smelt wolf last night, you got scared headed back inside. That’s believable. You’ll be disciplined, but I’ll make sure it’s light. As for this Gabriel character, leave him to me. For now, go in and make breakfast for your mother so she’ll go easier on you. I’ll get rid of the tracks around the farm, so Ruth doesn’t see them. She raised enough wild waifs back in the day to know these aren’t wolf tracks.”

67. Samantha does as her father tells her, and her mother seems unconvinced until Calvin comes in to join her for the breakfast Samantha’s made. He says he’s going out hunting for the wolf who attacked their farm, as he’s bold and may be back. Samantha feels conflicted about this. She reflects on how others knowing she interacts with Gabriel risks her chances of being seen as human. She’s also putting herself in physical danger if Gabriel is the killer, or worse yet, the witch. On the other hand, if Calvin’s wrong, Samantha stood to gain a friend in Gabriel; a friend like *her!* More than that, killing is *wrong* because Gabriel isn’t just an animal, he’s a *boy*, just like she’s a *girl!* Surely, she can’t let father just shoot him.
68. Samantha decides she can get her dada to reconsider killing Gabriel if she convinces him to take her along on the hunt. Over breakfast, Samantha says she wants to come along with her dada to prove she doesn’t have to be afraid of wolves. Given what happened to Samara, Ruth says no and so does Calvin.
69. After Calvin leaves alone, Samantha sneaks out and follows his scent. She catches up to him and begs her father to turn back, as she is not entirely convinced that Gabriel is responsible for the attack. She picked up an “odd, alien” scent in that area rather than Gabriel’s scent. Calvin is unmoved and orders Samantha to return home. He needs quiet so as not to alert Gabriel. Fearing for Gabriel’s life, Samantha makes the decision to run ahead, making high-pitched contact calls to alert Gabriel.
70. Calvin calls after Samantha but other than turning back, can’t do anything and he can’t stand to leave his daughter alone with a monster. He runs after her with his rifle raised to defend her. This allows Gabriel to get the drop on Calvin and he is seriously injured.
71. Samantha uses her body to shield her father and begs Gabriel not to kill him. Gabriel realizes Samantha believes that he’s a killer and asks if leaving Calvin alive will prove to her that this is not the case. Samantha is not sure, but agrees in the hopes this will save her father. Gabriel says he’ll let Calvin live, but only if Samantha promises to live with him in the woods and Calvin promises never to tell anyone about them. Calvin refuses and Gabriel growls at him.
72. Samantha says that if this is really his first time killing someone, then he’ll be taking his first step towards becoming a windigo. Gabriel realizes Samantha is correct and backs off. Gabriel promises he is not the killer and simply asks for Calvin’s word that he’ll be left alone if he leaves him alone. Calvin reluctantly agrees, so Gabriel asks for one more promise. That if Samantha ever changes her mind and decides to come into the woods to live with him, he’ll leave them be. “That’s absurd,” says Calvin. “Samantha would never—” Gabriel cuts Calvin off with a “we’ll see.” Then he tells Samantha that he knows what it’s like to try living amongst humans. She won’t be able to do it forever. Eventually, she’ll realize it and return to him.
73. With that, Gabriel disappears, leaving Samantha to use the skills she learned from Joseph and Niimi to provide enough makeshift first aid to patch Calvin up, get him on his feet, and help him back home where they claim they called off the hunt as Calvin was injured and

must now recover.

74. The townspeople grow excited for the summer barn dance. At the moment, Ruth has disciplined Samantha's sneaking by not allowing her to go out to see Joseph for a few weeks. But whenever she's in town for church, Samantha's keen fox ears can even hear the faintest whispers forty yards away, and she secretly listens in on all the conversations they're having about what an occasion this is in town. There are wonderful games like pin the tail on the donkey, bobbing for apples, and wonderful stories. It's also seen as a night of maturity, when the girls become women by having their first dance with a man. The townspeople wonder if Joseph will take Gloria along, as it is rumored that they were an item, but no one has seen them interacting recently. They consider it a pity if he doesn't take her, as thanks to Gloria, they approve of how Joseph is assimilated to the point where he's "essentially white" now.
75. Samantha thinks back to the story of the frog prince and comes to believe that if she were to get a human to fall in love with her like the frog did, she may become human herself. Or at the very least, the town would fully accept her as human just as they've accepted Joseph as white. She also sees this as a way to prove Gabriel wrong.
76. With the goal of obtaining an invitation to the barn dance, Samantha goes on her best behavior, not only successfully suppressing her instincts but trying to appear as Blackbird Peak's idea of an ideal woman to impress Joseph. At the same time, Samantha's animal instincts constantly scream inside her for release. It is torture for her, like there's a monster constantly gnawing at the back of her mind.
77. Surprisingly, Samantha becomes something of a sensation around town, albeit more for the novelty of the resident monster acting ladylike. She's no longer feared, but she's more of a joke to the town than genuinely accepted, and given her advanced senses, she knows it.

Note: This is a story beat I am stuck on. I cannot think of specific, logical steps for Samantha to take to impress Joseph or to appear more human. This also feels like something that shouldn't just be glossed over in a summary, as it feels like something Samantha should put a lot of effort into achieving so it hits her all the harder when the barn dance doesn't go well. However, I could also see this portion getting repetitive if Samantha just keeps trying to wear nice dresses or exaggeratedly act more human. I also have a feeling these sequences also run the danger of becoming unintentionally comedic rather than sad and pathetic, which is the intent. This is something I will need to get my editor's assistance on.
78. As Samantha is now actively trying to be Joseph's ideal woman, Gloria realizes what she's really trying to do. Gloria also realizes that Samantha is wasting her time on a goal that she can never accomplish. Gloria gently tries to steer Samantha away from this objective, but Samantha accuses her of trying to hold her back. In frustration, Gloria flat out tells Samantha to look in a mirror, she's just going to humiliate herself if she shows up at the dance. Samantha runs away on all fours, crying.
79. Back home, Samantha goes into the bathroom and fumbles around until she finds her father's shaving kit. She takes out a razor and cream and smears herself with it, preparing to shave off her fur to look more human. As she does so, she feels her snout, ears, and tail and realizes just shaving off the fur will do no good. Instead of shaving off her fur, she puts the razor to her snout, hoping to cut it off even though it would blind her as she "sees" through her nose. Just as she starts to cut herself, Ruth comes in and stops her.
80. As Ruth disinfects Samantha's wound, she gets the crying fox-girl to explain what happened

- to make her take such measures. After hearing what Gloria said, Ruth tells Samantha that she's beautiful just the way she is, they just need to bring it out.
81. With the wound patched up, Ruth cleans the shaving cream off Samantha, then brushes her fur so it looks nice. Then Ruth helps Samantha sew to sew a beautiful dress to wear the next time she sees Joseph for her lessons, and lets Samantha wear her best perfume. She instructs Samantha to ask Joseph if he wants to go to the barn dance with her rather than waiting for him to ask her. Samantha loves this idea and agrees.
 82. The next time Samantha sees Joseph, she is wearing her new dress, wearing her mother's perfume, and her fur is immaculately combed. During the lesson, Samantha shows even more confidence than usual and by the end, asks Joseph if he wants to take her to the barn dance. Joseph likes that idea, as he sees it as a way to get back at Gloria as she'll be there to see him taking someone who isn't even human.
 83. Samantha is overjoyed when Joseph agrees. She throws her arms around him, secretly wanting to sniff his glands, but suppressing this instinct. Instead, Samantha gazes into his eyes meekly and thanks him. Yet she can't resist letting a submissive whine escape her mouth as her ears flatten against her skull.
 84. As Calvin and Ruth help Samantha prepare for the barn dance, they reveal a special present for her; they've spent a lot of money they don't have buying Samantha perfume like Gloria's. They spend some time helping her put it on when Joseph arrives to pick her up.
 85. At the barn dance, everyone stares at Joseph and Samantha with either vague amusement or discomfort. She notices, and during a slow dance with Joseph, she hears them crack uncomfortable jokes under their breaths and also whisper rude comments, that she never would have heard if she were human. As her anxiety develops into fear, Samantha takes on a horrible odor, which is made all the worse for mixing with the perfume. She hugs Joseph tighter for comfort, like she does with her mother when she's anxious. The pungent smell of fear and shame reeking from Samantha is almost too much for Joseph to take, but he endures it for her sake. Until he realizes that—though she's not even aware of it—Samantha has started wetting herself in fear. Urine drips down from underneath her dress and onto Joseph's shoes. At first, he just stares at his shoes in silent disbelief, mouth hanging open as he stops dancing.
 86. Samantha smells her own urine and even Joseph's discomfort, but it's not until he stops dancing that she opens her own eyes to see the urine pooling around their feet and spreading out to the rest of the party. At first, the partygoers don't know how to react. Then one of them starts laughing. Then another, and another! Only Gloria doesn't laugh, and instead covers her face in shame as everyone else at the party laughs hysterically. The onlookers drink in the fox-girl's pain like fine wine, grateful that this time, they're part of the laughing crowd and not the object of abuse.
 87. Joseph is taken aback by the laughter, which seems to snap him back to the reality that he's being soaked with urine. Without thinking about it, he pushes Samantha away, shoving her so hard that she slips in her own piss. Her dress flaps up as she falls, and instinctively expels a defensive stink from her supracaudal gland, as she fails about over the yellow puddle to land safely on all fours. She unintentionally sprays Joseph with the defensive odor, causing him to scream and turn away.
 88. Without rising to her hind legs, Samantha whips around to face Joseph, desperately apologizing while grabbing at his shirt. For the first time since she successfully suppressed her instincts, she starts yapping and apologizes, grabbing his hands in hers, and pulling

- herself up to his level and trying to look him in the eye.
89. Joseph looks past her, his eyes hunting for a way out, and Samantha grows desperate. She grabs each side of his face to force him to look her in the eyes, desperate to see the warmth and compassion there that she once did.
 90. “Joseph—*yap-yap-yap*—Samantha—*yap-yap*—Sammy sorry!—*yap-yap*—Sammy—*yap-yap-yap-yap*—Sammy love you!”
 91. Joseph stares at her in shock. “What?” he asks.
 92. Samantha speaks again, with even greater effort than usual. If typically, she seems like she’s coughing words out, now she seems like she’s vomiting them out.
 93. “**I**—*yap-yap*—I love you—*yap*—**I** love-you...”
 94. Joseph is horrified. His patience shatters and he definitively rejects Samantha, admitting that he will never be able to love her because she’s not human and never will be.
 95. Upon hearing that, Samantha throws herself down to the ground again, rolling around in her own urine as she kicks and screams, ruining her dress. Joseph turns away in shame, wishing he could pluck those words out of the air even as he spoke them.
 96. As Joseph starts to slink off, Samantha abruptly leaps up onto a table in front of him. She poses there on all fours, mouth agape, gekkering and hissing at Joseph! Then she leaps off the table, overturning it in the process. Samantha proceeds to rip cloth and ornaments to shreds, and steal instruments and bits of clothing. Samantha even starts burying them until men arrive and attempt to catch and restrain her. Before they can, Samantha wiggles away, and lets out a scream rivaling that of a banshee as she takes off into the woods.
 97. As she runs through the forest, Samantha spots a squirrel foraging for nuts to eat over the winter. Normally, a fox would stalk such prey slowly, taking advantage of cover and with its belly to the grass, but Samantha bolts at the squirrel the minute it’s in view, screaming in rage. The squirrel is inexperienced and not much older than a kitten, but upon seeing her, it dives into a tunnel. Samantha bounds away from the hole, whining in frustration. For a whole minute, she runs back and forth, whimpering and snapping at the air in agony as she remembers Joseph, until she finally lies down in silent defeat.
 98. That’s when the squirrel emerges from another hole. It makes its way back to where it had been to forage again. Samantha snaps back into her rage and darts at it. The squirrel escapes the same way, but this time, Samantha bounds to the exit where she snaps at the squirrel as it emerges. Samantha strikes clumsily with her jaws instead of trying to pin the squirrel down with her hands. She catches it momentarily in her jaws, but just as she starts to shake it, miraculously, the squirrel scrambles out of her jaws. It darts toward the hole, but Samantha blocks it and for a few frenzied moments, she and the squirrel twist around each other in a blur, with the fox-girl using her tail to maintain her balance. Growing tired, the squirrel desperately tries to run past Samantha to get into the hole again. That’s when Samantha pounces, and properly this time. She pins the squirrel to the ground with her hands and delivers a killing bite to its neck.
 99. Too upset to consume her kill, Samantha takes out her frustration by screaming and throwing the squirrel around like a ragdoll. She tosses it up and catches it in her jaws, shakes it, then spits it out and rolls it over with her hands, before madly flinging it about again with her jaws. Even after it starts coming apart, she continues biting into its separate bits over-and-over, until its entrails litter the ground.
 100. Samantha’s eyes are wide with agony. There seems to be nothing human left in them. Just a cyclone of rage and pain as her canine jaw hang open, screaming, screaming, *screaming!*

Samantha's runs her hands—*no, her claws*—wildly over her face. The inter-pad hairs there and the vibrissae on her wrists make every detail of her head clearer to her than if she were staring in a mirror. If possible, Samantha's—*no, the fox-girl's*—screams grow all the louder. She flinches with every touch to her angular ears, her long, pointy snout, her wide-open jaw, her lolling tongue... and her fangs; curved like daggers and piercing her own skin as she presses down too hard, her anxiety burying her caution. She screams the loudest then, and it is her last scream of the evening. It is not one of physical pain, but rather, penetrating stab of complete misery, bereavement, and defeat.

101. The screaming stops. Samantha tears off her bloodied dress and, using her jaws rather than her hands, rips it to pieces. She digs a hole with her claws, then uses her snout to nudge the dress in and bury it, sliding the dirt over it with her muzzle and flattening it with her nose. She indignantly lowers her anal regions toward the mount to mark it as hers, then abruptly decides against it, and rises from her squatting position. She wants to claim no ownership of *that* aspect of herself. Instead, Samantha rolls around and rubs herself in the squirrel carcass, covering herself in its scent and feeling comfort. Free from all the painful memories and regrets that come with such humanity, her mind goes blissfully blank.
102. Samantha runs deeper into the woods, with no aim except to get as far away from society as she can. As Samantha runs, she notices one thing... she still wears the crucifix around her neck. As Samantha passes a river, she tears off her crucifix and throws it in.
103. Gabriel catches Samantha's scent on the wind. He stalks and eventually catches her, ignoring her pleas that she was the one seeking him out. While pinning her down, Gabriel's lips curl back to expose his fangs. He growls a warning. Samantha lacks this ability, and has to let her mouth hang open to gekker in response.
104. When that doesn't get Gabriel to back down, Samantha stops gekkering and instead exposes her jugular vein. That act of submission calms Gabriel, and finally, he speaks. He asks Samantha why he should let her trespass on his territory—especially as she rejected his offer to live with him.
105. "But Gabe-ree-el said Sammy could come if Sammy change mind!" she cries. "And Sammy learn Gabe-ree-el *right!* Sammy no fit in!"
106. Gabriel releases Samantha, and she explains what happened in more detail. The coyote-boy is intrigued but still hurt that she initially rejected him. He tells her she is just reacting emotionally, and if she wants to stay with him now, she must prove she's changed.
107. Samantha hears a frog croaking nearby. She kills it and eats it, then turns back to Gabriel with a defiant glint in her eyes. Impressed, Gabriel agrees to show Samantha his range. He also shows her a nearby mineshaft, which is dangerous and to be avoided while hunting. Samantha is also prohibited from even seeing the "forbidden cache areas" Gabriel has outside his glade, which piques her curiosity, but which she agrees never to set foot in.
108. Samantha asks for Gabriel's side of the story with regards to why he was keeping her as an infant. Not wanting to admit to her what happened yet, Gabriel says he's not sure he should go into that, as he's still not convinced that he should allow her to stay. Gabriel says now Samantha must prove she's capable of living in the wild. Samantha says she already did, and that in some ways, she proved she is wilder than he is. Gabriel says that's true, and for this reason, she must pass an even more complex test to make up for rejecting him. And even if she does prove herself, in order to stay, she must also do Gabriel an unspecified favor in exchange for hearing "the truth" about her past.
109. For her test, Gabriel orders Samantha to steal a special meal: eggs from a great horned owl,

a natural predator to the fox. This owl is using a Red-tailed hawk nest, located in a tall pine tree. Samantha's first problem is getting up the tree, but she learns to maneuver her way up by gaining momentum through practicing on other trees. She jumps on the side of the tree and uses it as a springboard to jump up to branches, which she can grab hold of with her human hands. But that's only half the problem. Samantha's next task is to defeat the owl. This is problematic because the mother owls don't leave the nest except to hunt, and upon doing so, the male takes over. This puzzles Samantha, and she's fearful of attacking the owls knowing how fierce they are. But then she remembers how she learned to create and fire bows and arrows with Joseph. Samantha fashions a makeshift bow and arrow from items in the forest, and chooses a tree that is just close enough to the one the owls are nesting in so that they won't see or hear her, especially as their backs will be to her. Owls are not generally considered to have much, if any, of a sense of smell. But Samantha does not know that, and chooses a tree that's downwind of the owls. Then after managing to get up the tree by taking a big leap, running up, and using a human hand to grab hold of a branch, Samantha waits.

110. Given her vulpine eyes, Samantha can only really see the owls from a distance when they're moving. Since living in the wild she'd noted "normal" animals don't seem to be able to either. While she's trailing downwind of hares at a distance, as long as she remains still, they will let her get close even if their eyes meet her. That was why she kept to the tall grass and only moved with her belly to the ground when the hares weren't looking, unless of course, she was herding them to Gabriel. It was difficult, but through deductive reasoning, Samantha is now able to tell that while living things are harder to see when still, they're still alive and still present. Nevertheless, Samantha must rely on smell to make sure they're there, and given her vision, must also wait for the mother owl to switch places with the father owl before she fires. Yet fire she does, and her shot kills the mother owl. The father owl attacks her, but Samantha planned for that, and as he attacks, he flies into a snare she planted.
111. Samantha retrieves the eggs and brings them to Gabriel. He is baffled as to how Samantha got the eggs. At first, she doesn't reveal how. She fears he'll consider this "cheating" as she is meant to be wild. Gabriel tells her that while he'll let her stay for now, until he's sure she's worthy of providing him with the favor, he won't tell her the truth about her childhood.
112. Privately, Samantha starts making more traps to catch game, something Gabriel never learned to do himself. This impresses Gabriel when he discovers a fox inadvertently killed in one of Samantha's traps, and this leads to a conversation between them. Samantha explains that she learned human hunting techniques by spending her first sixteen years in Blackbird Peak. Since returning to the wild, she has observed how other animals, including foxes, use reason, but only to a certain degree and under certain conditions. This is frequently what got them killed. Changes in the environment would concern some of them, yet if bait was appealing enough and they could not scent enemies, they would go for it. Samantha on the other hand would question how it got in such improbable places. Given the opportunity, she is confident she or Gabriel could reason her way out of one of her traps, yet when one accidentally catches another fox, they cannot.
113. Although she doesn't admit it outright, Gabriel can tell that Samantha is perhaps learning to appreciate her human side again. He comments that their advanced senses give them an advantage over humans in hunting and detecting danger, which Samantha herself admits is true given her experiences hunting with humans. Gabriel then takes it a step further and says

that he believes God made them to be *better* than the humans and animals, and therefore, they can do with them as they please.

114. It is here Samantha admits that her faith in religion has wavered, since her plan to turn into a human girl didn't work. That's why she felt comfortable eating the frog to prove that she'd changed, no longer believing frogs are potential princes in disguise. Samantha says she's started doubting all the stories that she once used to direct her life. As she puts it, she's "thrown away her old baby stories."
115. This angers Gabriel. In fact, according to Gabriel, "God made man to rule over the animals, and now God has made us to rule over man." He believes one day, thousands more animal people will appear and will overthrow the humans. Samantha considers this idea, but is not fully convinced of it.
116. "What Sammy doing?" Gabriel asks, breaking the silence.
117. Samantha looks to see that she was subconsciously feeling for her discarded crucifix with her hand.
118. Now that Samantha is allowed to stay, she must learn Gabriel's schedule. She prefers hunting at because it's easier to smell while Gabriel has a slightly different schedule, being more active during the day. Although Samantha often sees Gabriel around dawn and dusk, it's rare for her to see him at night because that's typically when he sleeps. When Gabriel asks why Samantha prefers the night, she says it's because the sun tends to "kill scent."

Note: This could be glossed over in just a paragraph of prose, but perhaps this section needs to tie into a longer arc so it naturally flows into the next scene. In any case, there's no obvious unit of conflict here, unless I wanted to build something around Samantha and Gabriel having conflicting schedules, though he was happy to adjust his schedule to play with her at night when she was living with the McGimsies. I'll have to get my editor's opinion on this.

119. These hunts build to a climax where Samantha and Gabriel have a run-in with a mountain lion. Gabriel screams in terror, recognizing this as the beast that killed Marianna. He never dreamed he'd find it on his own range.
120. At first Gabriel stands up tall, waves his arms about to look big, and is about to throw a rock at the mountain lion. But this time, Gabriel slips before he can throw the rock. This nearly costs him his life, as the mountain lion rushes forward to strike!
121. The cougar opens its mouth to bite down on Gabriel's throat, but he manages to roll over to dodge, and instead, it clamps down over his face. As the cougar's jaws close, the space between its upper and lower teeth resembles the void between the jagged ledges on the plateau, the ones that inadvertently saved Gabriel's life before he could fall too far. But now the void had returned in the mouth of this creature that no longer fears him.
122. Samantha recognizes the mountain lion's scent as it attacks and realizes that *this* is the creature responsible for Marianna's death, not Gabriel! As the mountain lion claws at Gabriel, Samantha starts throwing rocks at it while shrieking, then bolts past it. This triggers the creature to abandon Gabriel and chase Samantha instead.
123. Samantha initially tries to lead the mountain lion to one of the traps she's set, but realizes it's gaining on her too quickly to make it and instead makes a beeline for the mineshaft, which Samantha knows to leap over but which the mountain lion plummets down.
124. This experience clearly unnerves Gabriel. His terror of mountain lions makes a great impression on Samantha, as she's never seen him so afraid before. He never wants to see another mountain lion again and hopes there aren't more around, and admits he not only

- recognizes it as the beast that killed Marianna, but that attack was not the first time he encountered what he refers to as “the monster.” Samantha presses Gabriel on the matter, but he says he’s too weak to elaborate.
125. Gabriel spends most of his time in his glade to recover from his wounds, which Samantha helps with, given her medical knowledge. He does little more than cuddle his stuffed elephant. Samantha observes him attempting to “father” the toy the way she mothered her doll, but he does so roughly, making Samantha shutter to remember that he once cared for Arthur—and, briefly, for *her*.
126. As Gabriel only leaves the glade occasionally to test his strength, Samantha must bring him food that she hunts. These are the only interactions she really has with Gabriel, and they are always brief, with rarely a word spoken between them. They revert to a schedule of Samantha being mostly active at night while Gabriel is active at dawn and dusk, and even then, only rarely.
127. Now that Samantha largely has the territory to herself, she feels renewed curiosity regarding the forbidden caches. She waits until the older smell of Gabriel’s scent markings ensure that he has not been there recently. Then, remembering what she learned on hunting trips with Joseph, rubs dirt, leaves, and pine needles deep into her fur and especially her hand and feet pads, in order to mask her scent. Samantha makes her way to an area where “hidden caches” are, which Samantha sees is on a cliff.
128. It turns out this “food cache” area is in fact a makeshift graveyard, marked with old carnival props in the place of headstones. Samantha digs the earth beneath the headstones until she finds the uneaten corpses of baby animals buried. When they’re not decayed to bone already, they look like they’ve been starved rather than killed violently. Samantha is unnerved, and that emotion grows into terror when she digs up the remains of a human infant implied to be Samara, given its unusually small skull and short neck. Lacking any clothing, the corpse is also wrapped in rotted remains of what look to be a black cloth.
129. Samantha does her best to rebury the bodies, flattening the dirt with her snout, and even going so far as to walk off backwards once she’s finished, wiping away her hand and paw prints as she goes. Once she’s satisfied, Samantha runs off.
130. Later, Samantha considers her next course of action. Should she confront Gabriel? He did try to care for Arthur, so maybe these are simply past failures and now he knows better? But then again, what if the mountain lion was just a convenient excuse? What if he really is just a cold-blooded *killer*?
131. As insurance, Samantha plants a new snare that Gabriel is unaware of, and which she can lure him into by pulling on the skin of the dead fox she caught in one of her traps. She props it up with branches and can pull on this from a distance near the snare to take advantage of Gabriel’s limited eyesight and focus on movement.
132. When Samantha starts heading back to the glade after setting up the snare, she smells Gabriel approaching. Her fur and ears stand erect and she raises one arm as a normal vixen would her forepaw. Gabriel has picked up traces of Samantha’s scent in the forbidden area despite her precautions. Samantha is initially scared, but Gabriel says that she should start having more privileges and “knowing more” if she’s to stay with him. Now that he’s recovered from the attack and Samantha’s proven her worthiness, she deserves an explanation. Not only for why he had her as an infant, but where he knew the “monster” from, and why he has a graveyard full of infants. Luckily, these all require one explanation: Gabriel’s backstory.

133. Gabriel reveals that he once lived far away from Blackbird Peak, where he was found in the woods by a well-meaning couple who had difficulty conceiving children of their own. Initially, all went well and Gabriel was coddled until he hit puberty and his natural instincts became a problem. Now Gabriel felt a need to avoid enemies, mate, and seek food, but these were all unnecessary in his current environment. Frustrated, Gabriel began excessively grooming himself and often making repetitive, stereotyped movements like an autistic child. He also became increasingly irritable, even attacking the neighbor's dog when provoked at one point. Gabriel's parents respond by chaining him up outside and generally treating him like an animal. This confused and hurt Gabriel, as he did not understand why he was being treated differently. Keeping Gabriel outside coincided with his parents finally giving birth to a biological son, who they started coddling in Gabriel's place. Gabriel grew angry and began to resent the baby who was now warm and safe in the house with his parents while Gabriel was left cold, wet and alone outside.
134. One night, Gabriel broke free from his chain and entered the house where he stood over his baby brother. Yet instead of attacking him, Gabriel simply asked him why he took his parents away from him.
135. Gabriel claims that his mother came into the room at that point. He hid while his mother vented her frustrations at her biological child as she stood over his crib, saying she never realized how much work children would be. Gabriel claims he witnessed his mother suffocating his brother with a pillow, although he did not realize what she was doing until it was too late. When his mother breaks down weeping after completing the act, Gabriel says he emerged from his hiding place and asked his mother what she was doing. His mother looked up in fear and screamed for her husband as Gabriel stared down into the crib and nudged the dead infant with his snout.
136. The way Gabriel tells it, when the infant didn't respond, he lifted him in his jaws and shook him, hoping to provoke a response. In her private thoughts however, Samantha surmises that Gabriel's mother never entered the room until after Gabriel started shaking the baby. She believes that when the baby failed to respond to Gabriel's question, the coyote-boy seized him in his jaws, accidentally killing him. Samantha concludes that Gabriel's mother only came in after hearing the noise and Gabriel confabulated a false memory where his mother was the murderer in order to assuage his guilt, just like Gloria constructed false memories about Samantha attacking her cat.
137. Either way, once Gabriel started shaking the baby, his father arrived in the bedroom as well, and was convinced by the sight and by his wife that Gabriel was the one to kill his brother in jealousy and is enraged. Fearing retaliation, Gabriel ran off into the woods. With him, he took the stuffed elephant lying in the crib beside his brother.
138. For the first time, Gabriel relied on his instincts to survive. Initially, Gabriel wasn't very good at that and grew underweight and covered in ticks. He attempted to follow coyotes and wolves to join their packs, but Gabriel was too human to do so. The coyotes retreated because they recognized him as a human from his behavior, such as walking upright. Due to food being scarce, the coyotes were dispersing more often anyway. The wolves even attempted to kill Gabriel to cut down on resource competition, given how scarce game was during this time. They would have been successful too, had a traveling carnival not been going through the area at the time.
139. The carnival owner (who doubled as the barker) scared off the wolves with gunshots. Gabriel then accepted the carnival barker's subsequent invitation to join him on the road

- in exchange for food, but immediately regretted it. The carnival barker kept Gabriel locked up in a cage as the prime attraction in his “freak show.” During performances, Gabriel was forced to fight and kill animals that the carnival barker had disguised as “freaks.” He whipped Gabriel when, at first, the coyote-boy ineptly fought them by biting haphazardly, instead encouraging him to use the techniques that a coyote would, such as proper neck holds. Only when Gabriel correctly kills his “enemies” via suffocation is he able to feed. From observing the carnie, Gabriel also learned basic human survival skills like starting a fire. The carnie also delighted in scaring poor Gabriel each night with stories he’s heard on his travels, and it’s here that Gabriel learned the tale of the windigo.
140. Over time, Gabriel learned proper hunting techniques from these ordeals and he grew fit and strong. Still, it was traumatizing for him, and when confined, he began circling his tiny cage and making repetitive, stereotyped movements once again. No one tried to help Gabriel, believing the barker’s latest attraction to be “a fake, like all the others.” The carnival barker also refused to feed Gabriel unless he fought, leaving him in his cage otherwise. There, Gabriel only had his brother’s stuffed elephant to cuddle for comfort.
141. Eventually, Gabriel had enough. He went on a hunger strike by refusing to participate in the fights, thus cutting off his access to food. The carnival barker initially decided to “wait Gabriel out,” confident he would get hungry enough to “do as he’s told” sooner or later. This lack of food allowed Gabriel to get skinny enough to slip through the bars of his cage one night. Before running into the woods, Gabriel stopped to steal some food, as well as the carnival barker’s skeleton key. He used the key to free as many animals as he could, including a mountain lion. The mountain lion would have attacked the foolish Gabriel upon being released, but luckily for the coyote-boy, the commotion had woken the carnival barker up. As he approached the cages to see what’s going on, Gabriel finished opening the cage, and the mountain lion pounced onto the carnival barker. This starving cougar was also disciplined with controlled access to food, and was happy to feast upon his tormenter, the carnival barker, although he ineptly bit at his face at first, not having much experience with hunting. This led to a prolonged, excruciating death on the carnival barker’s part.
142. Meanwhile, Gabriel fled once again, and wound up in the woods surrounding Blackbird Peak. Gabriel now lived on supplies he stole from humans and the coyote techniques he learned at the carnival.
143. Samantha realizes the mountain lion must have gained a taste for human flesh after eating the carnival barker, and eventually found its way to Blackbird Peak as well. Gabriel agrees, glad his name has been cleared, but Samantha says that this still doesn’t explain the graveyard or why he kidnapped Arthur, not to mention Samantha herself back when she was little.
144. Gabriel admits that since losing his family, he had become lonely. Although he resented his brother, he now felt somewhat responsible for his death (even though he still insists his mother was the killer) and wants to find someone small to care for in his brother’s place. He tells a story of how he was able to catch up to a doe by the time winter rolled around. Weakened by those harsh, hungry days, she was only able to move slowly through the deep snow, giving Gabriel an advantage. He clamped his jaws over her neck and maintained his hold until she suffocated. Although this doe had two fawns, Gabriel initially ignored them. Gabriel would regularly kill any canine babies, as he recognized them as resource competition and was also bitter about being rejected by the coyote and

- wolf packs. However, in terms of baby prey animals, Gabriel felt strange about killing them. Somehow, they reminded him of his brother.
145. Yet as Gabriel ate his kill, he realized the adult doe had been pregnant. Feeling responsible for the surviving fawns now, Gabriel tracked them down. Upon finding them to be a buck and a doe, Gabriel saw they had lost their spots and were just barely surviving on the bark and dry grass under the snow. Gabriel rationalized that he had in fact had “rescued” these fawns by killing their “neglectful” mother. Feeling responsible for the well-being of these fawns, Gabriel captured them and attempted to raise them himself. The fawns remained terrified of Gabriel, but were too weak to flee, especially with all the snow. Thus, Gabriel had no trouble began keeping them bound with rope like his mother once kept him bound. For food, Gabriel brought them squirrels and rabbits. However, their teeth were not strong enough to bite through their thick skin to reach the nutritious organs within, so they could only chew on their limbs. Unable to forage farther as they were tied up, the fawns soon died from a combination of stress and malnutrition.
146. In mourning, Gabriel wrapped “his babies” in black cloth he had stolen from campers and buried them. He carried on this tradition with other baby prey animals he came across, most of whom died, either due to capture myopathy, because they required their mother’s milk or because he didn’t know how to care for them. This eventually expanded to the occasional human baby. Although Gabriel still actively killed the children of rival predators to limit resource competition, the infant Samantha was an exception, for Gabriel was fascinated to discover another human-animal hybrid. He explains how her murderous biological mother was killing all her other babies, and he had attempted to rescue her, and that’s why he had her when her “dada” came across his range.
147. Samantha is freaked out by this story, and admits as much to Gabriel. She says he should have known after the fawns that he couldn’t care for babies and was simply damning them to slow deaths if he attempted to raise them. Gabriel admits she’s right, but now he won’t have to do so anymore! Since he’s told her the truth, now she is obligated to honor the final part of their deal.
148. Samantha asks Gabriel what he specifically wants. Gabriel goes on to explain that he knows he cannot create a family by kidnapping babies. He also knows he’s biologically incapable of impregnating normal animals. He’s tried it on young, inexperienced wild dogs who he managed to get the drop on during mating season. Not only wolves and coyotes, but even foxes as he grew more desperate. It failed every time. But as Samantha is another animal-person, Gabriel believes that he could impregnate her and then they could raise a family. Now that she’s proven herself to be a capable mate by passing his tests and especially by saving him from the mountain lion, Gabriel is convinced she’ll make sure their children survive.
149. Samantha is having none of it however. She remains traumatized from her experience going into heat and wants nothing to do with sex. She wanted Joseph to love her, but she has an idealized and naive conception of what love between humans means. Therefore, Samantha tries to dissuade Gabriel by arguing that she doesn’t think it will work. Gabriel replies by saying they should at least try.
150. Gabriel grows increasingly aggressive and tries to force himself on Samantha. Samantha pulls at the spots where the mountain lion bit into Gabriel as he climbs on top of her, and he releases his hold on her as he cries out in pain.

151. Samantha runs away as Gabriel calls after her. He declares that if he can't have a family, then nobody should! If she wants him to stop ruining other families, then she should give *him* a family!
152. While Gabriel is stronger and would normally catch up to Samantha easily, he is still recovering from the mountain lion attack, which slows him down. Taking advantage of Gabriel's limited eyesight, Samantha makes sure she runs with the wind in her face so her scent carries back to Gabriel when she arrives at the trap that she covered with the skin of a fox. Hidden in the foliage, Samantha yanks the pull as Gabriel lopes into view. The fox-skin seems to move. Recognizing the fox skin as Samantha because her scent's all over it, Gabriel is lured into the trap and is left hanging from a tree.
153. Samantha knows Gabriel will likely get out of the trap and considers using her bow and arrow to kill him. Yet she chooses not to because he seems human in a way the owl, hares, and mountain lion do not. *Human*, she thinks. *Like Sammy*.
154. Samantha is afraid to live in the woods with Gabriel around, but isn't sure if she deserves to go home because of everything she's abandoned. Then, stuck between two rocks in a stream she passes, Samantha feels her discarded crucifix on her feed pads. Crying, Samantha kisses the crucifix with a lick of her tongue before slipping it back on. She says a prayer to apologize to God for straying from His path, then flees back to Blackbird Peak.
155. As she runs, Samantha starts whimpering as she longs for the comfort of her family. She knows that if Gabriel frees himself, he'll follow her. But she trusts her "mama and dada" to protect her. She's *sure* Gabriel will be no match for her dada's rifle! She passes a familiar area and notices the spot where she buried the remains of her dress. She digs it back up. It's ripped, torn, bloody, and muddy. Yet she pulls it back on. Wearing the shredded dress, Samantha continues. Although it's black as pitch, Samantha picks up on the smell of farm animals and her family, and follows it through the darkness as though it was a bright torch.
156. When Samantha arrives at the farm, she claws on her door on all fours, wearing her dirty, torn dress and calling for her mother. "*Mama—WOW-WOW-WOW!—Mama!*" she barks. When Ruth opens the door, she finds Samantha lying down straight on the porch, with her chin resting on the back of her dark velvet hands. Her ears are flattened and her eyes are narrowed, guiltily avoiding Ruth's gaze as she apologizes for running away. Ruth cries tears of joy and kneels down to hug Samantha. Apology accepted, Samantha lashes her brush rapidly, embracing her mother as Calvin arrives downstairs as well. Calvin joins in on the hug and apologizes for not heading out to rescue her, saying he tried but could still hardly walk. Samantha just licks his face enthusiastically, overjoyed to see her dada again.
157. Ruth wonders what they're going to tell the rest of the town, who now consider Samantha a menace. Calvin tells her they're not going to worry about that for now. Instead, they pet and praise Samantha, taking her to the table and preparing all of her favorite treats. She crawls onto the table, kicking things over as she wolfs down her food as ferally as she did when she was little, but none of the McGimsies mind. Even little Emily is allowed to crawl onto the table and cuddle with her foxy big sister.
158. Following her adventures in the wild, Samantha is underweight and covered with ticks. Calvin and Ruth spend days removing them, and for the first few nights, Samantha can't bare to sleep alone. Despite her smell, she must rest in her parents' room in a little bed they prepare with a bowl of water. Whenever the bowl is empty, Samantha starts screaming which is more to get attention than because she's thirsty.
159. The town is suspicious of Samantha so she keeps to the farm even after she's recovered.

But things grow increasingly tough for the McGimsies now. The town views Samantha as a monster, and even demand Calvin release her to them. Eventually, Calvin has to come out with his shotgun and order them off his land. The townspeople say they'll be back with their own guns if she ever harms their children.

160. Gloria and Joseph discuss how they feel bad for how they both treated Samantha, especially after what happened at the barn dance. They have made up due to their mutual guilt giving them a reason to speak to each other again. They wish they could visit the McGimsie farm to apologize, but they're not allowed to. At this point, Samantha becomes aware of how much pain she is putting her family through by remaining part of their lives. She wonders if they were perhaps happier when it was just them and Emily.
161. Meanwhile, Gabriel has freed himself by rocking back and forth until he was able to swing to another branch, grab hold of it, and pull himself onto it where he could gnaw off the snare. Knowing the way back to Blackbird Peak, he follows Samantha there. He waits and watches from the trees until he finally sees Samantha doing her chores on the farm again. It's then that he makes himself known, threatening to kill more of their livestock or even attack her family unless she comes back to his range and mates with him.
162. When Samantha shrieks for her father, he comes out, still hobbling a little from his injuries but no longer needing to use a crutch. He screams at Gabriel to get away from his daughter and says he'll be back with his rifle. Gabriel runs back into the woods, but tells Samantha that she better rethink things, or he'll be back.
163. Gabriel starts killing livestock to frame Samantha. The farmers catch sight of him doing so at a distance. As there are so few farms on the Canadian Shield, these farmers believe the McGimsies are ordering Samantha to do this on purpose in order to sabotage their few rivals in the area. They report this to the mayor in a rage.
164. The mayor calls a meeting with Calvin and Ruth where he orders them to release Samantha to the police peacefully, or they'll be forced come to their house to arrest her. Calvin and Ruth plead that it's Gabriel committing these crimes, and cite the fact Samantha's always at the farm where the crimes occur as proof. But as the only witnesses to Samantha's whereabouts are Calvin and Ruth themselves, this is considered a lie to cover for Samantha. The mayor says now the town largely believes she was really the so-called "witch" all along, and while Samantha might be able to live if they arrest her now, they'll outright kill her if anyone else dies like Marianna did before this is through.
165. Gabriel finds the farms are all too well-guarded for him to raid now, often by men with guns. He decides to try hunting wild game again, when he comes across another home located on the periphery of the woods with a single dairy cow who is left unattended. As Gabriel arrives and rips into the cow's hock joints apart to disable it, he notices a glint in the sunlight as a shotgun is turned to take aim at him, while his nostrils fill with man scent from that direction. Too slow to run due to his injuries, instead Gabriel pounces at the bushes to tackle his would-be assassin before he can fire, inadvertently knocking the shotgun out of the man's hands. It goes off in the man's face, killing him.
166. Gabriel hears the screams of a child from indoors, who in spite of his fear of the coyote-boy, runs to his dead father's side, weeping. "*SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!*" screams Gabriel, but it does no good. Insane with guilt and fear, Gabriel bites into the child's neck to silence him. This works too well and kills the boy instantly. The taste of the blood drives Gabriel even crazier. He's tasted human blood! There's no going back now! He's a windigo, a windigo, A *WINDIGO!* In his mad panic, Gabriel tosses the dead child around,

- disemboweling him and severing his body into various pieces, just as Samantha did to the squirrel. The scene ends with these lines of prose: “Windigo or not, Gabriel wanted his legacy, whether it was one of life or one of death. He would breed Samantha. By force, if necessary. Together, they would spawn brood after brood, year after year. If not, he would kill as many people as he could and for as long as he could. If he could not have his own bloodline, others blood would spill, denying his victims’ lineages as God denied him his.”
167. Gabriel makes his way to the McGimsie farm, carrying what’s intact of the child’s body in his jaws, even as his entrails leak from his stomach, while in his hands, he carries the child’s severed limbs. Crazed, Gabriel smashes in through Samantha’s bedroom window, not even caring as the broken glass cuts him. The impact causes Ruth’s china doll fall down from the shelf Samantha keeps it on. It shatters to pieces on the floor below, its shards scattered amongst the broken glass. Gabriel drops the remains of the dead child in Samantha’s lap. He demands return with him to the woods now, or he’ll do this to Emily, who he hears crying. Gabriel leaps out of the window and retreats, just as Calvin and Ruth open the door to see Samantha covered in blood and with the dismembered remains of a child. Samantha screams in horror.
168. Meanwhile outside, Joseph and Gloria are finally heading to the McGimsie farm in secret to apologize to Samantha. The adults have been alerted to something they can’t tell the children about, so Joseph and Gloria see this as an excuse to sneak to the McGimsie farm through the woods instead of heading their directly and risk being seen. On their way however, they notice a trail of blood. Before they can turn back, they see Gabriel lumbering back the way he came on all fours. He decides to kill them so they can’t tell other people that another animal-human hybrid is responsible for the crimes. Deciding to split up so he can’t chase both of them, Joseph continues running towards the farm while Gloria runs back the way she came. First, Gabriel disables Gloria by ripping apart her hamstring tendons with his teeth so he can come back for her later, then he turns and lopes after Joseph. His injuries slow Gabriel down enough for Joseph to make it to the farm, but Gabriel still catches up to him. Calvin leaves the farmhouse with his rifle to see Gabriel with his jaws clamped over Joseph’s neck as he collapses his windpipe. Shocked, Calvin hesitates for a moment. Gabriel leaves Joseph to pass out from pain and lunges for Calvin’s throat. Both stumble back into the farmhouse. Before Gabriel closes his jaws over Calvin’s neck, Samantha slips under their feet on all fours, and seizes hold of Gabriel’s testicles in her jaws. Whenever Gabriel tightens his jaws on Calvin, Samantha bites down a little harder. Gabriel realizes that if he hurts Calvin, Samantha will destroy his genitals and he will never be able to have a family.
169. Meanwhile outside, other townspeople arrive with guns, as it turns out the body of Gabriel’s would-be assassin was discovered, and the adults also saw the blood trailing back in the direction of the woods that leads to the McGimsie farm. This is the final straw and they make good on their threat to return to the McGimsie farmhouse to kill Samantha.
170. As the townspeople approach, Gabriel gradually releases his hold on Calvin, but once he does so, he orders Calvin to empty his rifle and then hand it to him for insurance so he won’t be shot. Calvin complies, and Samantha starts tugging at Gabriel’s testicles, indicating she wants him to leave the farmhouse.
171. On all fours, Samantha gradually leads the upright-walking Gabriel out the front door. She exits first, dragging him by his testicles and thus is the first one seen as the gunmen arrive. They immediately take a shot at Samantha, injuring her. Before they can take another, Gloria calls out to say that it’s not Samantha attacking, having dragged herself to Joseph’s

- side. Gabriel takes the opportunity to kick Samantha away, then dives inside to avoid further gunshots. Inside, Ruth clutches Emily close as she cries in terror. This gives Gabriel an idea. He slashes at Ruth with his fangs, then he grabs Emily and runs through the house. Finally, he jumps out Samantha's already broken window, making his way back into the woods.
172. Bleeding to death, Samantha crawls to the bathroom to get to the first aid kit. She passes her bedroom just in time to lock eyes with Gabriel before he escapes through the window.
173. The gunmen arrive at the door with Joseph who is breathing, steadily but weakly, while another carries Gloria in his arms. Calvin angrily explains what's happened, but quickly notices Samantha has disappeared. As they look around for her, they realize she's raided the bathroom for first aid supplies. Calvin says they have to go after her and Emily, but still believing Samantha's the only monster, the gunmen hold Calvin at gunpoint, not trusting him to give them her correct location.
174. In the woods, Samantha quickly performs basic first aid on herself. She should rest so as not to risk reopening the wound, but Samantha's done this hurriedly so she can take off after Gabriel herself, having every reason to believe the gunmen still consider her a threat. She follows the scents of Gabriel and Emily back to his cliff, where she hears Gabriel screaming in all directions at her. He says that unless Samantha comes and mates with him, he'll kill Emily just like he killed the other child.
175. Making sure the wind is at her back, Samantha heads down to the mineshaft and climbs down to find the rotting body of the trapped mountain lion, having died in the fall. Samantha rubs herself in its corpse to hide her scent, then approaches Gabriel's cliff, this time upwind of Gabriel's voice so the mountain lion scent carries. This spooks Gabriel enough to leave the cliff, forgetting to take Emily with him. As Samantha arrives and grabs hold of Emily, she sees Gabriel bounding straight for her. As she was upwind of him, she couldn't be sure how far he had fled and was hoping he was far enough away that she'd be out of eyesight.
176. Samantha makes her choice fast. With no time to run away again, Samantha scrambles down the ridges of the plateau with Gabriel under her arm. In her frantic scramble to escape, Samantha's bullet wound reopens and she starts bleeding to death again. Samantha calls to Gabriel as he follows her down the ledges, saying she understands. She forgives him because she knows what it's like to be rejected and to be alone. But they don't have to hurt others just because they've been hurt. They can run away together, she'll even have his babies if he wants, but please, just don't hurt anyone else!
177. Gabriel doesn't believe her, and as he pursues her, a horrible thunderstorm starts. As the ledges are awash with water, Samantha huddles with Emily, completely still so they won't slip and fall. Gabriel finds he cannot locate Samantha by scent because the rain washes it away, nor can he locate her by sound or by sight because she's not moving, and even if she was, the rain falling in all directions makes it impossible for him to hear. But in his madness, he does not stop scrambling around to find them, and with her eyes so attuned to movement, Samantha can see as he slips and falls thanks to the rain. The last words Samantha hears are Gabriel crying for his mother. She looks up to heaven as she holds the baby, believing God intervened. She prays to God to forgive Gabriel, so that he will feel loved in heaven.
178. Samantha herself feels weak at this point, as she's still bleeding to death. But she doesn't risk climbing back up the plateau until the storm has passed, which is mercifully short, something she accredits to God. She stares at Emily, seeing her close up enough to be clear even to her, as well as her inter-pad hairs and vibrissae making the perfectly human child's every contour clearer to her than it could ever be to another human. An unexpected emotion

penetrates Samantha's heart: jealousy. Samantha considers how hard having a fox-girl around is on the family, especially now that Gabriel's framed her. She also remembers that once Emily was born, she felt herself being replaced. She knows even if she is praised as a hero in the short term for rescuing Emily, as a perfectly formed human child, Emily will ultimately replace her in the family. Samantha considers throwing Emily off the cliff so she can claim she tried her best to rescue her but failed. That way, at least her family will still want her to replace Emily.

179. But Samantha loves Emily too much. Instead, she gives Emily one last cuddle, then gently makes her a bed with grass, leaves, and fur pulled from her belly. Samantha watches over Emily, even as she starts feeling weak and things start getting fuzzy from the blood loss. Samantha wonders if she's going to be dead before anyone arrives to collect Emily. Then, although they're out of eyesight, Samantha she hears the humans arriving and smells them on the wind. Then with a final lick to Emily's forehead, Samantha disappears into the woods. Samantha hopes she can get back to the first aid kit in time to save herself, but she doesn't really believe she will. Samantha stumbles, not because she tripped, but out of weakness. As she hits the grass, she decides all is well. She remembers the story of Saint Christopher and what Joseph told her about faith. Samantha doesn't have definitive answers for why she's different, but she chooses to have faith God made her this way for a reason.
180. Calvin and the gunmen arrive to find Emily safe and sound. He finally convinced them to let him lead them to Gabriel's range, as that was their only lead even if they suspected he was lying about Samantha's location in order to save her.
181. In the coming months, Gloria and Joseph recover, and Gabriel's corpse is eventually found. Samantha's body is never recovered. Years pass. At age six, Emily is old enough to play outside and while there are no more animal attacks, people claim to see a fox-woman from time to time, keeping watch over people from a distance, though disappearing whenever she is spotted. There are also occasions when children and even adults fall into trouble and the fox-woman is rumored to have rescued them.
182. Things take a dark turn when Christmas approaches. Another child gets lost during a snowstorm. However, he is found safe the next day, claiming a big fox kept him warm all night with her tail, then led him back to the village.
183. At the next year's October barn dance, Joseph (with his fiancé Gloria at his side) recounts The Legend of the Fox-Woman of Blackbird Peak. Given time, it seems the legend of the fox-woman protector will replace that of the witch, which is no longer told. The legend goes that this Fox-Woman lives in the woods and is said to be a benign spirit tasked with protecting the residents of Blackbird Peak.
184. After arriving back at their farm, Emily asks Calvin and Ruth why they were crying when Joseph told his story. They begin to tell her, when they think they notice someone familiar watching them from the woods. Then she disappears when they notice.
185. Samantha slips back into the darkness as her human family look back in her direction. If she had the facial muscles for it, she would have been smiling.

THE END.

AFTERWORD:

I only wanted to include one fantasy element in the novel: a pair of animal-human hybrids. Otherwise, I have made an effort to generally present the world accurately, believing this makes the animal-people more believable. That said, some artistic liberties have been taken where it benefits the story. In the interest of not misrepresenting nature, these liberties are clarified here.

Some guesswork has been involved in exactly what certain animals, such as mountain lions and coyotes, smell like. While the strong, skunk-like smell of the red fox is well-documented, the latter creatures often don't give off a smell that is as detectable to humans as it is to animals. While some people have attempted to describe it, there is no definitive definition of what a coyote or cougar smell like. The smells Samantha is described as experiencing were based on various personal accounts from people and seem to be based more on what their scat and urine smells like, or what they smell like than they're wet, indicating that this may not be the natural scent they themselves carry. In terms of their eyesight, the way Gabriel and Samantha—literally—see the world is based on the most current science, but a lot of that is extrapolated from dogs and there is not a lot of study specifically on what a coyote or fox sees. As more study is done, the representation of fox and coyote eyesight in this novel could become dated.

Although Blackbird Peak is a fictional location to allow for some leeway in how Northwestern Ontario is portrayed, the author made an effort to generally remain true to reports of what life in the Lake of the Woods area was like during this time. With that in mind, there is some debate about whether or not the range of the mountain lion includes Northwestern Ontario, given they were thought to have been wiped out by early settlers. While there have been sightings dating back to the time period in which this novel is set, and even video evidence in recent years, many consider cougars in this area to be an urban myth. To this day, skeptics say that any mountain lions recorded are simply captive animals who have escaped. Therefore, it is left ambiguous whether the mountain lion who escaped from the travelling carnival was captured in Northwestern Ontario, or obtained elsewhere through some other means. The data seems to indicate mountain lions are at the very least, exceedingly rare in Northwestern Ontario. In the absence of further study, we simply don't know, and this novel should not be considered a confirmation or denial of either point-of-view.

Though not unheard of, mountain lion attacks are also exceedingly rare whatever the locale. Nevertheless, it is very likely a starving cougar would attack its tormentor for food if released, which is what occurs in this novel. This could very well lead to further attacks if the creature subsequently developed a taste for human flesh. However, these are special circumstances developed for this novel in order to create a sense of doubt about whether or not it was Gabriel attacking Blackbird Peak. It was also to give Gabriel something to fear, as mountain lions will eat both foxes and coyotes, and this fear becomes necessary as the smaller, weaker Samantha must later use her wits to defeat Gabriel in the absence of physical strength. In reality, coyote attacks are also rare, and when they do occur, they rarely result in serious injury. When Gabriel does turn violent, it is more due to his human desperation and desire for revenge than anything to do with his animal instincts. These same human emotions prevent him from killing Samantha and to initially trying to care for baby prey animals an ordinary coyote would have no problem devouring.

In the novel, Gabriel believes that he can breed with Samantha and readers are given no reason to doubt him. In real life however, foxes and coyotes cannot breed due to the discrepancy in chromosomes. Coyotes have seventy-eight chromosomes while foxes generally have around thirty-six to thirty-eight. Given their human characteristics, Gabriel and Samantha are closer in

chromosome count to each other than they are to ordinary foxes and coyotes, or even to humans. Despite that, they would be unable to breed for the same reason humans cannot breed with chimps: even a difference of two chromosomes makes that impossible. As they have no way of knowing that (and to maintain Gabriel's motive for pursuing Samantha) the impossibility of successful copulation between them is never addressed.

The book takes some liberties with regard to mating. Foxes generally avoid physical conflict due to the risk of injury, rarely going beyond aggressive posturing, but true fighting is more common around mating season. Even then, combat is conducted head-on, with wounds most often sustained to the face and neck. While the retreating mate's rump is sometimes attacked by the pursuing male, there are no reports of the foxes going for the genitals. Though the dog fox competing for Samantha only takes hold of his rival's genitals by accident, I contacted several wildlife rehabbers to confirm this could occur. I found genital injuries in foxes are rare, and when they are reported, the cause is unknown but is considered to be most likely be the result of trying to squeeze past fences. While it is physically possible for foxes to sustain genital injuries from a rival (and anomalies do occur in nature from time-to-time), the reader should not consider this an accurate representation of wildlife. After consulting with Marc Baldwin of *Wildlife Online* however, the author decided to take Baldwin's suggestion to forego strict biological accuracy in the interest of using Samantha witnessing this to set up the later scene where she seizes Gabriel's testicles in her jaws to protect Emily.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Baldwin for the time he dedicated in answering many other questions to make sure the novel is believable. *Wildlife Online* is an excellent resource to learn more about foxes and other UK wildlife. For additional resources for those inclined to learn more, I recommend the books *Free Spirit: A Brush with A Fox* by Michael Chambers, *The Blood is Wild* by Bridget MacCaskill and *Running with the Fox* by David MacDonald.

In addition to Baldwin, I would like to thank the following individuals. Eric C. Johnson, who provided constant support, both as a friend and as an early reader; freelance editor Ellen Brock, whose expertise proved invaluable for retaining the author's vision in a commercially viable novel; Mark Mayerson, a screenwriter and graphic novelist who taught the author while he earned his Bachelor's Degree in Animation at Sheridan College, and upon retirement, continued to invest hours of his own time in providing the author with feedback.

I would also like to give credit to the key works that influenced this novel. These include Dave Sim's *Cerebus the Aardvark* comic book series, especially the tenth volume *Minds*, which briefly depicts the aardvark protagonist growing up different in a community of humans. This made the author wonder what it would actually be like to grow up as a talking animal. While this is a common trope, it is one that is rarely depicted realistically. To achieve realism, the author was influenced by Daniel P. Mannix's 1967 novel, *The Fox and the Hound*. The absence of anthropomorphism, unflinching realism and gruesome detail captured in Mannix's prose allow the reader to experience the world as an animal might. In contrast, Disney's comparatively saccharine 1981 adaptation of *The Fox and the Hound* was a massive structural and thematic influence, as was Disney's 1999 adaptation of *Tarzan*. Both dealt with the recently orphaned protagonists being raised by members of another species and then struggling to adapt to both worlds.

The Disney versions of *The Fox and the Hound* and *Tarzan* are also examples of what this author coins "coming-of-age animal stories," which are typified by the Disney film *Bambi*. While *Bambi* itself was not a direct influence on this author, he was influenced by the original novel by Felix Salten. The tone and content are of this novel are very different to other coming-of-age animal stories, but they provided its structural template. The animated *Fox and the Hound's*

bittersweet ending also influenced the novel's ending, and in terms of mainstream animation, *The Iron Giant* was also influential in telling the story of a misunderstood monster who ultimately chooses to be good.

Postmodern superhero comics by Alan Moore and Rick Veitch were also influential in providing a template for treating an archetypical children's character realistically, be it a superhero or a talking animal. In particular, Rick Veitch's *Maximortal* was influential in exposing the horrific reality of what an infant with superpowers would be like. While not horror comics per se, the horror elements in Veitch's work solidified my choice to work in the horror genre for this novel.

In terms of full-on horror influences, I was mainly inspired by late-nineteenth and early twentieth century writers such as Algernon Blackwood, especially his 1910 short story *The Wendigo*. That tale introduced the author to the rural isolation of early twentieth century Northwestern Ontario, which provides the seclusion necessary to explore what growing up as an animal-person would be like, without the concern of the government interrupting. The work of H.P. Lovecraft was also an influence, though not in terms of his approach to horror or his mythology. Rather, the influence came in the form of the isolated, often rural, communities with hidden secrets present in much of Lovecraft's work. The two main influences in that regard would be *The Dunwich Horror* and *The Colour Out of Space*, the latter of which is even referenced in the second chapter as a possible explanation for the existence of Samantha and Gabriel. This is not confirmed, as the novel's earliest drafts did include definitive explanations for these animal-human hybrids, although these were quickly excised for straying too far from horror territory and entering into the fantasy genre. One beta reader felt there should be an explanation however, so in taking a page from George A. Romero's *Living Dead* films, a meteor like in *The Colour Out of Place* is offered as one of several possibilities for readers desiring an explanation. One of them may be true or none of them, but the author's hope is that readers will feel satisfied with Samantha's faith providing her with a reason why she is the way she is, even if there's no definitive outside proof that she's correct.

Beta readers also compared this novel to Stephen King's *Carrie*, and although that was not a conscious influence, the author is a fan of King's early work and feels he should acknowledge the similarities. While the resemblance is unintentional, King's book qualifies as part of a horror and psychological thriller subgenre that the author broadly defines describes as "outsider fiction." This refers to films like *Taxi Driver* or *One Hour Photo*, in which the protagonist is increasingly isolated from society until they self-destruct at the climax. In this novel, the author sought to deliberately subvert the traditional outsider narrative by having Samantha choose the high road instead of succumbing to antisocial behavior.

Furthermore, the author acknowledges the influence of the following novels and their animated adaptations. *Watership Down* and *The Plague Dogs* (novels by Phillip Adams; films by Martin Rosen), *The Last Unicorn* (novel by Peter S. Beagle; film by Arthur Rankin Jr. and Jules Bass), and *Felidae* (novel by Akif Pirinçci; film by Michael Schaack). Though these are very disparate works that did not directly influence the concepts in or structure of this novel, they share a dark, bittersweet tone and readiness to depict the harsher realities of life. This made for intriguing viewing to a young animation enthusiast. To this day, there is nothing quite like them, and prior to the ubiquity of computer animation, they were among a number of such animated anomalies produced from the late nineteen-seventies to the mid nineteen-nineties. This was the perfect time for such films to be made, for the earthy imperfection of traditional cel animation reflected their dark, bittersweet tone better than the slick vibrance of CGI ever could.

In my formative years, these films made such an impression on me that I grew up to work in the animation industry with the goal of eventually making such a film. The story of this novel was originally developed for that purpose. However, years in the animation industry have taught me that the raw beauty of traditional animation is no longer considered financially viable. Therefore, I decided that this story would be best told in a novel like the ones which served as the basis for these films. Despite the look of influence of cel animation being impossible in a nonvisual medium, without the aforementioned films, this novel would not exist. Therefore, I acknowledge their influence.