

## Chapter 18

"AHHHHHH!" I screamed, sitting up like a jack in the box. My heart was absolutely racing, I had never felt such fear before in my life since being captured.

A nightmare...

I had gone for seven months without one. No!

I scrambled out of bed, my blanket getting tangled up in my legs, causing me to fall forward onto my face. A er kicking o the blanket I rushed outside to breathe and regain focus.

Why- why that? What was that?!

I needed to see Ashkii, he would have the answers. I made my way to Ashkii's hidden hideaway. When I entered, he sighed sadly.

"I know why you're here, young one." He said. I gulped and sat down across from him.

"Ashkii... I had a nightmare, about Jack, and Nascha..." I felt that using her name was more humanizing than saying her form. He nodded.

"Tell me." I sighed and explained everything, how I saw Jack come see me, and how he transformed into Nascha, who then attempted to attack me. Again, despite his blindness, Ashkii knew how unsettled I was. He assured me that with some sage and a day out would help soothe my nerves.

"But, Ashkii, what does it mean? Why would I have a nightmare about Jack and Nascha the skinwalker? It makes no sense."

"You pine a er the Winter spirit, whether you want to admit it to yourself or not. As for the sk\*nwalker, you have unfinished business with her, and you must take care of it one way or another. I cannot answer why they became one in your nightmare, I would presume it would be because they are the most important things that you're concerned about." There was a pause as I let his words sink in.

Was I really pining a er Jack? I knew that I was worried about dealing with Nascha...

I needed to think... Did I want to go to Jack, or should I wait for him?

Ugh, well I wasn't going to do either if he wanted to come find me, then he could. I had bigger problems than my supposed "raging teenage hormones".

I was going to take care of Nascha first, one way or another.

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I sought out Kim's help, I asked her if she could research ways on how to deal with skinwalkers. I could see a ghost of terror cross her face when I said the word. Even though we both knew skinwalkers were a Navajo story, it didn't mean other tribes didn't know about the story.

When she got back to me, she and I had to recount the whole Sk\*nwalker story and break it down. We both knew that in order for one to become a Sk\*nwalker, a witch had to murder someone, most likely a relative. The very thought made me shudder, for both the Navajo and Hopi, murder was a serious taboo. It didn't cross my mind that Nascha might've been a witch as a human, and that made the situation even creepier.

A er recounting the extra details, a few I pointed out that Nascha did not do, such as wear a predatory animal skull and the such.

Then finally, she got to the part of defeating her.

"You need a shaman. Like, a ridiculously powerful one. They can turn the Sk\*nwalker's evil back upon itself." I nodded, that much I figured. I thought hard about it for a while, I sensed that Nascha was in pain, but I still... I still wanted to know why she sided with Pitch and use me for whatever it was.

I thanked Kim for her help but told her I changed my mind and decided to take a di erent route. She didn't ask, and I didn't want to scare her.

I made my way back to the mountains, nervous, but I didn't care. I needed to get this over with and get answers. I retraced my steps from walking around here and found her in a crevice, back turned to me.

Before I could get a word out, she spun around, glaring at me. I finally spoke.

"How could you." I hissed through gritted teeth. "I am not your pawn." My fists began to glow with my fire, swirls of light circling my hands, ready to defend myself.

"How could you" She echoed back, pointing accusingly at me like she'd done to Jack, "how could you ally yourself with those... COLONIZERS." She cried, her voice shaking. I could tell she was ready for me.

"Wh- they're not colonizers! What are you talking about?!"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about! You've been blinded by your own desires for that frost boy to see that you've betrayed us all!" I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"Nascha! You're being ridiculous! I've always stood by our people! I have not been ignorant to what's happened! You don't think I wish I could do something? I do! My death triggered a domino e ect on my tribe, and I watched it happen!" I could see her shaking like a leaf.

"You don't understand..." She whispered, a tear falling down her face. I lowered my arms. She was starting to break.

"Don't understand what?"

"Pain." There was a pause.

"Nascha... I understand as well as any other Indigenous spirit. We've seen too much and carried too much on our shoulders. Why don't you think I would understand?" Nascha trembled more, until she fell to her knees, her body shaking from her sobs.

"I never wanted any of this... I never wanted to work with Pitch... I... I never did..." I kneeled down beside her, I wanted to help her,

understand what she was going through, perhaps we could reach a mutual understanding and acceptance of each other.

"What happened Nascha?" She looked up, the intensity in her red eyes dying down. She poured out her heart to me, explaining every emotion she'd felt in great detail. She said her becoming a sk\*nwalker was an accident and done out of depression, she didn't know what she was messing with. I knew fully well what depression could do to your mind. She explained that ever since she did that to herself, Pitch had been stalking her, knowing her new form scared her, and she was scared of what would happen to her people on Navajo land. A er his defeat from the Guardians, he sought her out and used her own fears and anger against her, which is what they did with me. Nascha's intentions became more malicious.

"Pitch suggested using you to create a divide and mistrust." I nodded, beginning to realize.

"Between the Guardians... and others like us." I finished.

"Catori, everything I intended to do is because of what the colonizers have done to our people. We've never known peace since they invaded our lands, killed our women, and took everything from us. The Guardians are just a facade, protect the children of the world from us, for fear we'd corrupt them." This went far deeper than I had expected. But it made complete sense to me.

I hugged her.

She froze momentarily, processing the physical a ection, but slowly, she gave in and collapsed in my arms, and sobbed. And I let her cry.

And I began to cry too. We found solidarity. Solidarity in our anger.

Anger and pain for the hundreds of years of disrespect, dehumanization, every action white colonizers took against us. It was so relieving to finally understand, and accept our emotions.

But the one thing I couldn't agree with her on were her views of the Guardians. The Guardians truly protected every child. No matter their race, ethnicity, or religion. I told her what I had learned from them, explaining that they were not exclusive to white children, every child was protected by them. Even indigenous children. She couldn't believe it.

"I've been so blind... lied to..." She choked out.

"Pitch has used us. He knows all our greatest fears, and we cannot let him hurt others that way. We need to stand up to him. I'm not asking us to work together forever, but we should work together to stand up to Pitch and give him the ass-whooping he deserves. Send him where he cannot escape from."

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