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Peer reviewed

Fireborn

Deborah Miranda

1. SeLeni dreams about a long, sun-drenched field of blue flowers, tall spindly stalks with thin delicate petals; she dreams that these flowers close up every night, open each morning like tiny indigo hands. Convinced she's seen the location of chik-korri—the roots of which, dried and ground, make a potent savory drink not tasted for years—SeLeni records her dream. She knows it will most certainly kick off a council battle over importance and signification. But SeLeni is a Dreamer, so the council majority believe her when she comes to them after three consecutive nights' vision; that, plus the apprentice healer pulling out old Jereti's book with a list of illnesses reveals chikkorri's leaves and roots also work on various illnesses or injuries, seals the deal. The council does not yet talk openly about the fiercest hot growing period in their governance, but everyone knows how low the river level sinks each year, even as the tribe draws on it more heavily. Everyone knows if there is a pearl to be traded for profit—medicinal or luxury—it must be nurtured. That's why SeLeni braids her silver-streaked hair up tightly before dawn, unable to sleep, drawn by starlight. That's why she shrugs on her pack, rolls her shoulders into straps shaped to her body, fits a finely woven grass hat with a broad brim onto her head. That's how Trava ends up heading a scouting party in the hottest part of the hottest season.
2. Trava curses SeLeni as the sun rises like an ember, scorching the hardened rust-colored earth beneath his feet, and buzzers bombard exposed cracks of flesh at his ankles, wrists, and neck. One of the old stories claims the number of plants and insects harboring toxic venoms spiked along with the earth's fever; true or not, both hurt like hell long after any encounter. Trava keeps to the center of the

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old road even though shade from the forest is tempting, three scouts in diamond formation at his back; one to his left, one to his right, both about twenty feet back, and a tailer, twenty feet or so beyond them. He knows where each of his scouts walk by the unique sound of their foot-fall, the dear rhythms of their breathing. Trava listens, tracks his party with one part of his mind, surges ahead like an arrow with another part. He likes point, and point likes him; he says this with no boast in his voice when asked for preferences. Not that anyone bothers to ask him, anymore, just tells him to pick his team. He's found what he's good for, and has no illusions. Worst thing about scouting: snakes. Best thing about scouting: deer hide boots. Soft, tall and well-fitted, more cushioned than most. And good protection from fangs and thorns. Trava pulls his thoughts back from that abyss, maintains a steady pace, keeps the thready trickle of the stream on their left within earshot, as SeLeni's map instructs. So far, so good. Legions of cicadas in full roar dull the sound of their footsteps. They've passed the fork in the road, gone under the crumbling remains of an old stone bridge. All marked on SeLeni's map. Still. Trava doesn't trust Dreamers, never has. Even if SeLeni is his mother.

3. SeLeni walks in the middle of the diamond, protected on all sides but otherwise left alone. She insists on no distractions such as conversation or companionable chatter; doesn't want to miss a landmark from her Dream. She doesn't tell anyone this, but sometimes she doesn't remember a landmark until she actually sees it. This creates some tension between herself and scouts, who would like more direction from her than she can give. SeLeni wipes her forehead with the back of her hand; sweat stings her eyes, and every part of her body drips in this searing air. She knows this weather pattern—spring rainstorms that spread seeds and give explosive birth to the lush growth of food crops, wild grasses, plants full of life—is at the cusp of hot, dry months when wind and heat suck that green blood dry, transform the husks into tinder for fire's hungry belly. No respite, no mercy. And SeLeni's body aching with age as every season passes. True, like scouts, she has good boots, but inside, her feet feel as if they are sloshing in puddles. *Could be back at the river, soaking in the deepest, bluest part*, she berates herself, *but no, you had to have a Dream*. It's an old argument, older than her son, who thinks he's man enough to make judgments about her abilities. SeLeni shakes her head. She barely remembers that profound superiority of youth, much less being a whip of pure energy like Ticas, now pulsing on right point. Oh, Ticas.
4. Ticas, on right point, skirts closest to the thick undergrowth along the road's edge. Machete out, she steps around saplings or thorny vines trailing their own kind of poison, if it doesn't mean too much lost time; mindful of the fine line between energy expended avoiding, and energy expended slicing through. This hot season vegetation may or may not be harboring pikes, snakes or ground hornet nests. Not smart, Trava says, to stir up a creature who is content to let you pass by. Ticas likes to be smart. Still, it might be satisfying to take out some of her pent-up nerves on a thin treeling whose branches encroach on the road,

and her right arm muscles are tight and hard with anticipation. SeLeni would say, *Have respect for what grows, in whatever form, Ti*. So Ticas rests her brown hand, twitchy, on the smooth wooden handle of her blade and waits until there's no chance of a silent reprimand from the woman walking center. Today is Ticas's third scouting expedition, but her first with Trava. It's an honor to be chosen to accompany the Dreamer, and Ticas knows it; that's why she's more nervous than she should be. Too nervous to let the buzzers or dampness trickling down her close-cropped head to get to her. With enormous relief, Ticas gives a quick, silent prayer to Matsa for a respite from the nausea that has plagued her since the end of the cold season—though she still carries, in a corner of her pack, a discrete packet of dried tea that soothes the gut. Now, she knows, she has all of the hot season and most of harvest to establish herself as a scout before beginning preparations to give light. Ticas has not told anyone yet. Hard training, she knows, sometimes prevents a woman's bleeding; so far, none of the elder women have noticed. Just how Ticas wants it. Now, if Vel will just keep his mouth closed.

5. Vel, left-handed, fluent in machete, and long-winded for the march, has left point. He's not thinking about Ticas, no matter what she imagines; his mind is on keeping Trava in sight. As if, merely by watching his beloved's sweat-stained shoulders, long black braid and muscular legs push forward and forward, Vel can ward off evil or mis-step. He doesn't feel bad about not covering SeLeni as closely as he could; that woman has her own guardians, and besides, Ticas is like a tick on a deer when it comes to SeLeni's well-being. *Her first big job, she better be hyper-vigilant*, Vel thinks, sliding a thumb under his right pack strap; he hikes it up a bit where the water container chafes against his shoulder blade. Vel thinks Ticas has bitten off more than she can chew, wanting both scouting and child-bearing. But that's none of his business. *Sweeeet!* his blade slices through a vine of poisonous thorns reaching like a viper towards the road; it'll grow back quickly, but perhaps not by the time they make their return journey. The scar on his lower left leg stings from heat and friction, old memory of a vine he *should* have cut, years ago. Vel flares his nostrils as a heavy, warm breeze rolls past him, originating upwind; is that burn? has he missed some tell-tale wisp of smoke? They're too far from the river for his liking, and that spit of a stream would be no help in a conflagration. Vel stills his thoughts, runs a hand over his face to clear away sweat, and scents again. Glances back at Kirt to see if she picks it up as it blows by her at rear point. She catches his look, tilts her head up. Her raised eyebrows make his stomach lurch. If Kirt smells it too, he'll have to give the alert. Kirt is not quite the elder in this crew—but she's Fireborn.
6. Kirt's body thinks a lot more about fire than Kirt's mind does; most folk wouldn't believe that, or understand the ways that scarred flesh doesn't so much cover fire-wakened nerves as provide a wider surface for sensing, for hearing the lick of fire, the intensity of a spark's cry. *Your scars will be doors*, she remembers Jereti the healer telling her, his slender hands mimicking open, shut: *They will open onto landscapes of creation and destruction. Messages can come through those doors, but*

they speak only the language of fire. You'll have to learn it, if you want to survive. In the excruciating seasons after being caught in the lightning-strike maelstrom of a dry field, "survival" was not a word Kirt was sure she wanted to own. In fact, she felt for a long time that death held more appeal than this un-looked-for rebirth. Until the burns became scars, and the scars, as Jereti had predicted, began to receive; then, Kirt saw no choice but to accept the gift of being Fireborn at the age of fifty. Now, Kirt swings her glance in Vel's direction just in time to catch his wordless, over-the-shoulder query. Surprised that he might scent fire before her scars began to sing, she lifts her mottled face to a dull slog of a breeze. Ah. There—a tame fire, a captive fire. Burning hot and dry, no smoke. Small. Not ambitious at all, or Kirt would have felt its crackling little fits of glee. Still, Kirt is peeved, gives the alert whistle, low and calm. The scouting team, and SeLeni in center, pause in mid-step, turn not toward Kirt, but outward, all senses searching at sky, forest, earth. Finding nothing immediate, they half-turn toward Kirt. Her pack, lighter than theirs, slips to the ground; she stands with arms spread wide, lightly-woven cloth hanging damp from her thin limbs. They don't speak, know she's checking in, making sure. It takes just seconds; then, Kirt announces in her rough, smoke-ragged voice, "Camp fire. Dead ahead, half-mile at most. White oak, storm-felled last winter. And . . ." she pauses, not to reconsider, but because she can't believe she's going to say this, ". . . dried chikkorri root."

7. Trava motions Kirt up front, and she lowers her arms, scars tingling, slips on her pack, moves to his side. Cicadas rasp out lust louder than ever; her head aches a bit from the sonic assault. SeLeni always says if they could harness the power of cicadas, "we would be unmatched in battle!" It's a joke no one laughs at, since they all know thirst is their enemy, and not likely to be undone by any weapon but a swollen river. The sun stands almost directly over the small group, eradicating shadow. As Kirt passes SeLeni, a feather-light touch on her right shoulder from the Dreamer and her near-voiceless "good job" gives Kirt a little boost of confidence as she steps up to point and Trava drops back to rear. Kirt hates taking point. But without more discussion, Vel and Ticas tighten up around SeLeni. Kirt could find fire with her eyes shut; already her scars whisper the fire's loneliness. Someone has left it untended, unfed, and too well contained to chase after its creator. Behind Kirt, SeLeni murmurs, "We'll see a fallen pine with cones still attached, and then the road splits. There, in the center—a large field, all blue—" Ticas asks Kirt, "Same place?" and Kirt nods. A ripple of dismay over everyone's heart: has someone else found the chikkorri before them? Maybe even been there all along but not part of SeLeni's Dream? No one looks at her, but SeLeni feels an unspoken wave of irritation from her companions. She shrugs beneath her sweat-soaked shirt. People forget: the dreams choose her. Not the other way around.
8. Trava watches the back of Kirt's neck; the jagged scar there, just at the base of her hairline. Light pink: status quo. Bright pink: fire nearby, but not rampaging. Deep, pulsing red like the throat of a hummingbird: real trouble. In this case, Trava

sighs, any danger isn't so much from fire itself, as from the fire-maker. A whole other kind of fire. He doesn't check his weapons or run through the procedure for ditching gear in preparation for fighting; from long practice, Trava's body takes care of those rituals for him. Without his bidding, his lungs take slightly larger breaths with each inhalation, pumping up oxygen levels. His feet, encased in his boots, seem to spread out and find firm ground with each step. His eyes widen and take in more light, alert for more motion. His body, at least, is sure of itself. But Trava's mind leaps and wrestles with a thousand scenarios. He has already done the equation of small fire + burnt chikkorri, and come up with most likely scenario: drying rack for speed-processing root to powder. A big operation? A soloist? Have they already harvested most of the plants? Has the whole journey been for nothing? Maybe, he thinks suddenly, his spine straightening, maybe there are still some roots left in the ground to bring home and cultivate. They'd planned on that already, of course, but it might lessen the sting of an empty-handed return . . .

9. Ticas feels her skin glowing, a deep hum that resonates so sharply, she can almost see the backs of her hands luminesce as she grips the machete with two hands, raises it up off her shoulder to ready stance. The gesture clicks deep in her brain and all nervousness evaporates like it was never there. All she knows is now. Ticas doesn't realize she's smiling. She just knows she's ready, that standing behind SeLeni is the only place in the universe she needs to be. One of the reasons she loves being scout: the sense of wholeness that being alert gives you, the clean separation from worry, fear, doubt. In this state of awake, hyper-vigilance and sensory ramp-up might tax her body, draw on reserves of energy in ways that exhaust her later, but in that moment, the most peace Ticas has ever felt. She lives for it. That, and the way SeLeni's shoulders curve inward, and her braid slowly unravels in the humid air. Ticas figures she was created to protect her grandmother: being scout only made sense. Now, Ticas doesn't say anything, but SeLeni turns around and gives her a slight nod, eyes meeting for a second. *I'm okay*, the glance says, *but I accept your protection*. As the sole Dreamer for their community, SeLeni knows she must put herself in the hands of the one assigned to protect her when outside home boundaries. The exchange takes only a flick of an eyelash. Without missing a beat, Ticas pivots her hips to the right, bends both knees like supple springs, brings down her machete in a smooth, fast arc that makes the blade flash in the sun. Afterwards, SeLeni will remember that the first she knew of the attack was the sound of Ticas's breath escaping her mouth on the back sweep, which finished the job of beheading the creature rising up out of the forest floor at their feet, silent as fog with teeth.
10. "Dog!" It doesn't matter that Vel shouts seconds too late; feral dogs often run in packs, a nightmare no scout wants to get caught in. SeLeni drops into a crouch, knives sliding down her sleeves into each palm. Kirt, Vel and Trava hang poised, eyes darting through the underbrush for any movement, any flicker. No one speaks until Trava says, "Oak. My left. Now." With SeLeni rising to her feet, they make their way to a large tree at the edge of the road, knobby roots poking up

into the road. SeLeni leans back against the rough trunk, freeing up Trava, who steps away, examines the carcass carefully. Kirt takes a moment to feel for the fire, make sure it hasn't gotten unexpectedly out of control. If anything, the fire has grown smaller, and begun to whimper; Kirt's always surprised at the way she feels sorry for a dying fire. Jereti told her, *it's part of you, that's why; a part of you dies with it. Don't forget that. Take a little ember with you. You might need it, later.* Vel checks out the tree canopy for anything that might drop down: dead branches, snake, the fire-maker. Things seem clear; he's thinking he needs to climb this tree, see what's up ahead. He glances at SeLeni; yes. Vel drops his pack, backs up a few steps, leaps upward, snags a branch, hoists himself up. They hear the soles of his boots scrape against bark as he swiftly disappears into the thick leaves. "Ticas—nice catch," SeLeni says, in a calm low voice. Trava knows he should have said it first, but he's still inspecting the animal. Ticas gives SeLeni a searching look: "You sure it didn't . . .?" "Nope; not a scratch. You were faster." SeLeni examines her sleeves and pushes them back. Wild dogs often carry sickness; broken skin would be a disaster. "See? Clean." Ticas allows herself a short, "Good," then turns away to scrape the flat of her blade in wide rabbit's ear leaves. She'll wipe it down later tonight, when they've camped, when she's off duty. Right now, she doesn't want SeLeni to see her trembling. Not for fear; for sheer joy.

11. The dog is well-fed, its mottled brown fur clean. It smells only of dog—not disease, filth, or the distinctive stink of a scavenger. Not one of the larger varieties, this one's shoulders would have just reached past Trava's knees, were it standing. Trava has to admire Ticas's eye and technique. She keeps her blade good and keen, too, he notes—but she wouldn't have survived scout training if she didn't know how to treat her steel. The head rests a good foot away from the body, at an angle that reveals the clean cut. Lips still pulled back in mid-snarl, dark eyes open. "Notched," Trava says to the group. A working dog, then: someone's mark, a pattern cut into the edge of an ear—denoting human partners. "Valuable," Vel remarks, emerging from his climb and sitting on the thick bottom branch where he'd slung his pack, "but not our fault. It attacked." He motions with his arm up the road. "That downed pine SeLeni saw—not far. Clearing ahead, full of blue—they didn't get it all, by a long shot. No smoke. No one else on the road, far as I can see, but too much foliage to know for sure." Kirt only nods; she'd speak up if she had anything different to add. Everyone looks at Trava. He looks back down at the dog, running possible scenarios through his mind. Ticas has finished with her machete and stands, waiting. Her skin still hums. She won't let it go yet. She hears the cicadas again, though: she's coming down. "Probably someone working alone; lucked onto the chikkorri field and thought they'd do a little harvesting before going back for reinforcements," Trava says now, "maybe, someone who needed to bring back proof. Traveling with a dog; probably a pretty big settlement." Dogs are good workers, if you can get them early enough, train the wild out of them. Good water-trackers, too. But they're all thinking about the amount of meat it takes to raise and maintain dogs; not something their community has

been able to invest in yet. SeLeni has argued against it a few times in Council: "Better to put that food and time into children," she's insisted, "strengthen our population and, let's face it, maybe getting a Dreamer or two out of it, for when I'm gone." It was a hard argument to dismiss, and so far, it hasn't been necessary. But if another group with dogs is this close . . . "The dog was left to guard the field," Trava decides, "We'd have the owner here on our heads right now, otherwise. Vel, let's move the body off the road. Then we'll see about that field." As the two scouts lift the dog, Kirt scents ahead; it's like an itch, the way her scars want that heat. She's not as comfortable with that part of the gift yet. *That's why you have me*, Jereti's voice reminds her. Kirt swallows hard. Jereti. Some memories still bite, the way a pitch-spark shooting out of a piece of burning pine might pierce the skin.

12. "Wait." SeLeni steps forward, gestures toward the place in the bushes where the dog fell. "Give me a moment?" She doesn't wait for permission, but walks to the edge of the road, faces the decapitated corpse partly hidden by grass and vines. Ticas follows closely, machete ready; she only hesitates when SeLeni gestures that Ticas should stand beside her, not behind. "I got it," Trava says, and relieves Ti. He doesn't add, "Make it quick," but his body language shows his effort at restraint. *Damn*, Ticas thinks, and goes cold. She's about to get schooled. Still, Ticas stands quietly beside her grandmother, opens herself to whatever comes next. Never pleasant, usually necessary. Behind the two women, Vel and Kirt listen discreetly, swatting at bugs. Trava looks away, relieved that he has an excuse. The cicadas rise and fall in song, caterwauling like a massive waterfall. SeLeni kneels swiftly and reaches one hand out to the carcass, stroking the length of the curly back a few times; the body came to rest on its belly, as if awaiting a command. Then SeLeni leans forward, and with both hands, pushes the body over onto its side. Ticas can't contain her gasp: two rows of teats, still pink from suckling. *No!* Ticas thinks, then—*SeLeni isn't even surprised*. Her grandmother gestures to Vel: "Bring me her head." Which Vel does, carrying it in two hands like an offering. SeLeni aligns the head next to the dog's body on the ground. Ticas watches as SeLeni strokes the dog's muzzle, relaxes the snarl, closes the eyes. Tenderly, SeLeni murmurs, "We're sorry our paths had to meet in such a hard way, Dog. Under other circumstances, we could have been companions. It's my good luck and your bad that I have such an alert guardian today. You were loyal to the end. We'll tell that story for you." SeLeni brushes her face, wiping away wetness, says, "Ticas?" Ticas kneels, ignores stones pressing against her knees. She congratulates the dog on her ferocity, touches the flank with her fingertips; still warm, still soft. "I'm glad I was the quicker warrior, sister," Ticas says, "but I respect your discipline and faithfulness." To herself, she adds, *I'll tell my child how brave you were out here on your own. I'll find your pups. I swear*. As she gets to her feet, she sees SeLeni wipe her cheek again. It hits Ticas: SeLeni may have intuited that this creature was a nursing mother, but she wasn't ready for this encounter. *Crap*, Ticas thinks. *What else got left out of her Dream?*

