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Age: 16

Gitxsan

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The Power of One and All

Wolf was cautious and stealthy. Ever since law enforcement became present, everyone in Wolf's village had been subjected to injustice and inequality. Wolf himself was handled in ways that were very disrespectful and appalling. These strange people had tried telling Wolf's parents that they were practicing "satanic" rituals; if Wolf's family and everyone else were to continue these pagan traditions, they would go to Hell.

Tonight, however, Wolf's mission was to let his entire House know that there was to be a liseewa luuak- a death feast. The feast would be held at their local hall with those missionary camps only twenty or so meters away. This problem had been discussed and settled.

Ever since the Indian Act of 1876, the missionaries were scrounging within local communities across Canada to assimilate the "savages" into the "civilized" world of Europeans. The missionaries came to Kispiox, telling them that their life could be easier if they chose to enfranchise themselves. Part of the Indian Act was intentionally to force the natives across Canada to enfranchise if they wanted to be recognized as citizens in the country. Many of Wolf's relatives and neighbors chose to keep their status. Wolf did not understand; why did white men want his people to give up their traditions if they already had the Indian Act ripping apart their culture? Their death feast tonight was to recognize the head chief of the House. Without this feast, their House might fail to function because there would not be a new House chief to guide it.

To his left, he saw a flying owl peering down through the forest looking for its meal of the night. To his right flowed the stream that would serve as a quiet transporter of people and food to the landing site of the feast. His House was holding the feast right on the river bank; they had misled the missionaries to believe it was at the hall. This operation took swift action and became a community effort to divert the missionaries. As

for the feast itself, it was to be held at midnight with all the high chiefs and wing chiefs, all the house members of Wolf's House, all of the elders in the village and most importantly, the person who had been selected to become the new House chief.

Up and down the Northwest Coast, many tribes had tried unsuccessfully to hold potlatches. Wolf's village, Kispiox, was not an exception. Many families had tried to hold feasts for their beloved dead or to give a significant name to a relative. These feasts dictated who had what powers, who had recognition of their status within the tribe and who was who in their society's hierarchy. Countless times Wolf saw a neighbor dragged off in the night for alleged dancing, or drumming; countless times had he seen the police take away fathers, grandfathers, even children and women. All because they wanted to show their respect and acknowledgement of the dead, the memorable happy times, the heroic times and historic times in their family's history. It was a hard time for his people. They needed a leader, and they needed this feast.

Wolf took each step quietly, one step a tad quicker than the previous step. Soon he was sprinting through the forest with the alacrity of a wolf, making each step count, making each stride purposeful. It was only when he was sure that the missionaries' campsite was well out of vocal range, Wolf howled his practiced howl to indicate that all was right for the first canoe, with all the important chiefs, to make its way to the river bank and to ready themselves for a long night of dancing, chanting, stories and empowering speeches from the wise. He moved slowly back to the campsite, knowing his part of this scheme was in full swing; his part would decide whether this feast would be held at all.

Moonshine worked feverishly at her cooking spot at the riverbank. She had made enough food to last the whole night, enough to give out to the witnessing chiefs, to the one who would become chief, to all the guests from every house and just enough to hide for her brother Wolf. She was to see that the canoes came safely in and that everyone of importance was comfortable with his or her seating around the large circle. She was working on the oolichans when she heard the powerful voice of Chief Gungootan singing the welcoming song.

Wolf had only one thing to say to the missionaries when they questioned him. "We are going to have a death feast at our hall come nine' o'clock tonight." He did say

that, and they believed him. “The only good thing about these white people is that they are very naïve,” he thought. He went with haste now to the very same spot in the woods to repeat his performance, only this time, he would be directing his howl to the campsite. “This should send off the guests,” he thought, “I must get ready for the hardest challenge in my life.”

Moonshine and the other women and men from the house of Whitebear were to help at this feast. Traditionally, the whole clan helped at the feast, but because there were so few guests, one house could single-handedly take care of all the business being done at this feast. The chiefs were settled now, and the only sound rippling the silent ambience was another welcoming song. The guests were singing, coming down the river. Moonshine was scared of what might be.

Wolf strolled towards his house through the woods. He had readied himself for what he would say to the white law enforcers. These white men had told him personally that “potlatches” were useless and had no value. They were unproductive and proved nothing. However, these white people had no understanding of how the Gitksan enforced their laws and how their government worked. Wolf remembered his father selling drums, rattles, and special regalia, so that the white settlers would leave him and his family alone. If there were any items of importance to their culture, they would be destroyed immediately. Wolf’s heirloom drum from his grandfather was destroyed that way. As Wolf went around from the backyard to the front yard, he saw a large white man in a uniform; he resembled authority. This officer had a rifle in his hand.

“Tell us where your potlatch is and we will let you off lightly. If you resist, you and everyone involved in this potlatch will suffer mighty big consequences.”

“I might tell you where the death feast is held, but by then it might be over, for you are pretty late, umshewa¹.”

Moonshine was wondering whether the fourth canoe would hold her brother. He had sacrificed everything to make this feast possible. It was her turn to be strong. She was

¹ Umshewa- the Gitksan word for the white people. It means “colour like driftwood”

a year younger than Wolf and already, she was a big part of a feast that would determine the future of her House. This was an honor not given lightly to anyone. She heard another song beginning. It was coming from the river. It was the last canoe, but her brother was not in it.

It was a long night of dancing, talking, giving, and discussion. The chiefs made a circle just outside the main circle to bring forward the new high chief of the House. It was morning when they named the successor of the high chief. Moonshine wept inside herself with sorrow. She knew Wolf did not have to do this. Other men wanted to be the bait. He chose his role; he chose to be the scapegoat to retain the life of his people. Moonshine felt embarrassed when one of the older guests saw her tear-streaked face. The older lady was Moonshine's auntie. She came over to Moonshine and told her "Your brother is a strong man. He will be remembered as the man who saved our people and our House tonight."

"What if the next generations don't live long enough to take what is rightly ours? What if those people ban our whole existence and call us animals who just happen to speak as they do? What if he is dead and they still find us when we feast?"

"Don't worry, Moonshine. He did what was right for our people. He chose to be a martyr for our cause. We sold many items to get the money for our feast. We traded many pelts to get our gifts. We asked every single man if he truly wanted to do this dangerous task. Your brother was the first one who said he would do it without fear."

Wolf was imprisoned and then taken to a strange building where people only spoke English. He was told that if he was to save his freedom, he must tell the truth or his family would suffer for his foolery. He looked through his narrowed eyes and saw an old white man in a black sinister cloak sitting upon a high seat looking down upon him.

Wolf walked along the path of sorrow. He knew that this ban of theirs did not intimidate his people. He had served his purpose to divert them from the Gitxsan's important decision about who will lead the House through disease and through these bad times. Ultimately, the new chief would see that Wolf had the proper warrior's memorial when he died and again, the death feast would occur right under the White Man's nose.
