May 1952

Bitter Rapids, Minnesota

Maakade believed some foundations were impossible to fracture. He drove his shovel into the springy brown carpet of spruce needles, and the solid dirt beneath held strong. Reverberations from the impact of steel striking earth traveled up the handle, shocked his joints. Though the spring thaw was well underway, the rich soil deep within Superior National Forest was never entirely free from the bitter freeze.

The men working beside Maakade also struggled with the mandate to break the earth between the Rainy River and the old logging road, to reinforce a retaining wall built by Civilian Conservation Corps workmen during the Depression. Sweat darkened the underarms of their striped jumpsuits, despite the raw morning air. The government no longer funded the CCC to do such work. Why would they when inmates were in abundance to provide free labor? The men jabbed their tools toward the ground, jumped onto the shovel blades with their leather boots and hefty weight, endeavoring to split the earth, perhaps an inch, if they were lucky.

Maakade paused to catch his breath. He watched the water churn and rush downstream, frigid and pure from fresh snow-melt. A chiffon mist drifted out over the smooth rocks of the riverbank. He inhaled crisp, pine-scented oxygen deep into his lungs.

Prison guards watched the work crew from up the bank. Distanced from the icy mist of the river. Close enough to crack a skull when necessary.

“Get your black ass back to work, boy,” the foreman shouted. “Don’t make me come down there and get my boots wet.”

Maakade did not look back toward the voice. No need to give Foreman Ogren a reason to get his boots wet or his baton bloody. Maakade jabbed the shovel back at the frozen ground.

Most men still called him "boy," even though his raven hair was streaked with grey. They called his ass black. That, he did not mind. His mother had named him Maakade, the Anishinaabe word for black, out of love, so he would always remember the blood his father had given him. When his father died and his mother took him to live with her family among the Ojibwe Indian tribe, Maakade learned he would never be permitted to forget the black half of his blood, for better or for worse.

Across the river, an enormous bird swooped down from the jagged treetops, sounding an alarm call. *Kyak-kyak-kyak.*

It was not only Maakade who paused at his work now. All the jumpsuit-clad men halted their shoveling to watch the massive creature – easily four feet from wing tip to wing tip – glide down to the river. Its snowy, ebony-flecked feathers and vast wingspan gave the bird an otherworldly air. It perched upon a fallen cedar and folded up its great wings. Even the guards were intrigued by the unusual sight and eased their way down the embankment for a closer look. They rubbed their jaws and scratched their heads. None had seen such a bird, had ever even imagined one could exist.

None, except for Maakade. His eyes darted downstream and into the woods. His head jerked to look sideways and over his shoulder.

The other inmates noticed his agitation and a prickle of unease crept up their hairy arms. "What's the matter, Maak?"

"That is a gyrfalcon."

"So?"

Maakade could've said more. He could've said the mighty falcon comes down from the Arctic only in winter, never in spring. He could've said it flies and hunts by night, never by day. He knew the falcon was an omen, a warning sent to him by his Wolf Brother. He knew he could not say such things.

With a flourish, the great bird took flight again, winging low, its orange feet skimming the choppy water. The men watched until it disappeared into the mist upstream.

"Alright," the guards said. "Show's over."

The work crew returned to the task of breaking the earth, but Maakade's attention remained upstream. Ogren strode toward him, smiling, baton poised, pleased with the excuse to release some pent up frustration. Maakade sensed the guard's approach. He did not flinch. He merely extended his arm to point upstream.

Ogren slowed, despite himself. He glanced upstream, squinting into the sun that had finally broken over the trees and made the river sparkle. He saw what had captured Maakade's attention. A small canoe, careening downstream, pitching and bobbing over the torrents.

"Still too damn cold to be out on the river," he said.

Maakade nodded slowly, his gaze fixed on the tiny watercraft. In the distance, somewhere in the mist, the gyrfalcon sounded its warning cry again. Once more the group was captivated by the change from the mundane. They moved together in a huddle along the riverbank watching the canoe and its two small passengers approach the white water.

"Jesus, they're just kids," said one of the inmates.

"They'll never make it through those rapids," said another.

A pulse of energy surged through the group. Heavy boots shifted on the hard-packed riverbank. The men glanced back and forth, at each other, out to the river.

Voices mixed with the roar of the water in the distance – panic-stricken young voices – as the canoe angled down into the first tier of rapids. The craft disappeared in the foam. Maakade counted his heart beats. One, two, three, four. Finally, the canoe spurted up out of the river, nose first. It flipped end over end, catapulting the boys into the air. Time slowed. The boys seemed to hover midair before plunging into the frigid water, among the uneven rocks.

"I'll radio for help," shouted one of the guards, turning to scramble up the bank toward the bus.

No one else moved. They waited a lifetime, breathless, until the boys' heads finally broke the water's surface.

"Are you going in after them?" Maakade shouted to the remaining guards as the boys were whisked down the river toward them.

"I can't swim," Orgen said. The others shrugged their shoulders, pushed their palms upward in silence.

Maakade crouched down to tear at his boot laces. He looked in the direction of his fellow inmates. "Somebody get further downstream."

He stood and kicked off his boots, shed his jumpsuit and ran toward the river's edge in his undershirt and shorts. The glacial air stung his sweaty skin. He knew the water would be far worse. He pushed the fact from his mind. Little John – an inmate seven-feet-tall, if he was a foot – bounded along the riverbank like a giraffe. The foreman shouted after them both, telling them not to be getting any ideas about running off, thumping his baton against his palm.

Maakade's feet hit the icy water. For a fraction of a second, he hesitated. He took two more running strides and dove slanting into the rushing river. Every muscle in his body seized with the shock of cold. The current pulled him like a stone to the inky depths of the water. It

squeezed the air from his lungs – giant bubbles of oxygen blasting from his nose and mouth, escaping to the surface. His body was yanked downstream, submerged, paralyzed.

He must not panic, he knew. *This is my river. The river of my people,* Maakade reminded himself. The Anishinaabe and the Rainy River had served one another since the dawn of time. He had swum and fished and washed in the river since he was strong enough to stand. *Omagakiins*, his mother had called him. Little frog.

Maakade extended his body underwater, pushed his feet out in front of him, let the current carry him downstream and up until he felt the sun on his face again. He rolled to his stomach and swam perpendicular to the current to a fallen trunk wedged in the rocks. With his arm looped around a thick branch, he scanned the water upstream.

The boys had managed to find one another in the foamy water and clung together as they tumbled through the rushing torrents. Maakade timed their approach and lunged back out toward the center of the river, crossing the current, just in time to grab hold of the boys.

"Hold on!" Maakade shouted, catching a mouth full of water. He spit and shouted again. "Lay flat!"

They clung to his body as he powered across the current toward the shore. The larger of the boys kicked his legs to help propel their tangle of bodies and limbs. Maakade spotted another fallen tree jutting from the shore and grasped for it as the current pulled them toward the next tier of rapids. The rough bark tore the skin of his palm, but the frigid water had numbed all pain. The boys scrambled along his lanky frame as though he were a rope-bridge, through the water and up onto the trunk. They collapsed, hugging the branches, holding each other, faces pressed against the jagged bark. They gasped for air. Their bodies shook violently in the cold.

BITTER THAW – first chapter

Blood oozed from Maakade's palm, spiraled down his forearm into the river. The muscles in his shoulders began to tremble. His frozen fingers lost their grip on the branch. The current ripped his body from safety and propelled him toward the white water, where he disappeared into the mist and rocks.

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