

Coyote leaned back against a moonlit rock and dropped his cigarette, carefully grinding it under his heel. He thought about pretending not to notice Dog slide behind a tree, then shrugged and said "Hiya Dog."

Dog stepped from behind the tree, embarrassed. "How'd ya know I was here? I'm in stealth mode." "You're in some kinda mode alright" said Coyote "what are ya doing behind the tree?" "Checking the perimeters." Dog said earnestly. "What perimeters?" Coyote asked. "The world is ours!" "Oh, you know, just the perimeters. Its what Dogs do."

I'm thinkin' of having some fun with the people." Coyote said. "You want in on it?" "I don't think much about fun." Dog replied. "Duty. Duty is what Dog is about."

Rabbit popped up from behind a bush. "Fun?" He asked. "I like fun."

"You know that big blue Tlaloc people are always going on about? Funny looking god?"

"Oooh" Rabbit said "we don't want to go messin' with no gods, do we?"

"Ah, its a people god" said Coyote. "We have our own forest spirits. People gods don't apply to us. I figure, what we'll do, is make a big blue funny lookin' thing and pop it in people's windows at night. Maybe give 'em funny instructions."

Dog frowned. "I don't like it. I'm off. Perimeters, ya know."

Rabbit thumped the ground appreciatively. "I like it. How do we make it, though? We ain't got none of those opposable thumb things."

"The Magpies will help us with their beaks. They are always up for some nonsense."

The next night Coyote, Rabbit, and a host of Magpies gazed at a hastily constructed big blue funny looking god. His eyes glittered wickedly in the moonlight, thanks to the shiny bits the Magpies had stuck in them.

Coyote giggled. "Let's go find our first victim. I mean worshipper."

They crept to a hut and thrust the construct in front of an open window, while Coyote moaned low in his throat. The animals all quivered in anticipation.

A commotion arose inside the hut, and a chamber pot flew out the window, drenching the waiting animals in filth.

A woman shrieked "Husband! You can't do that! That was the Great God Tlaloc!"

"If you quit believing in those darned god things, Woman, we wouldn't have them in the window at night. Now go to sleep."

Twenty minutes later found the animals sitting in a fast flowing stream, repeatedly ducking their heads and shaking water from fur and feather. "Got any more bright ideas, Coyote?" Rabbit seethed. "So we happened upon the one guy in the compound who has some sense about god stuff" Coyote said "what are the odds?"

Dog thought ponderously. "Well, there are 36 people in the compound, that would make the odds-". "It wasn't a real question, Dog. More of a, what do ya call it, a figure of speech," Coyote explained.

"What do you want to go messin around with people for anyways?" questioned Dog.

“Why not?” answered Coyote. “What else is there to do?”

“Duty.” Dog said sternly. “This forest needs guardians, not silliness.”

“Why don’t you wander off and go guard that rock over there, Dog. That rock looks like it could use some protectin’.”

“I’m serious, Coyote.” Dog persisted. “Always tryin’ to outsmart everyone and pullin’ pranks, and most of the time they turn around and bite you on the tail.”

“Do not.” Coyote sulked.

Rabbit slitted his eyes. “This from someone with a chamber pot upside down on his head.”

“Why don’t you try puttin’ somethin’ right for once?” asked Dog.

“Like what?” Reluctantly, Coyote found himself becoming intrigued.

“I dunno. You’re the one with the big imagination. Fire it up.” Dog turned and headed off in search of a Dog mission.

The sun was coming up. Orange and pink bled into the sky behind the thick stands of trees. The Magpies twittered excitedly. Notorious late sleepers, they had never been awake early enough to find out if the early bird gets the worm phenomena was true. Now, by virtue of being up all night, they were going to find out.

Rabbit and Coyote climbed out of the stream to dry off and watch the sky change colors. “What do you think, Coyote?” asked Rabbit. “About what?” Coyote answered. “About putting somethin’ right, like Dog says.” Rabbit twitched his whiskers and snatched a blade of early morning grass. He was a forgiving soul—he had already put the chamber pot incident behind him.

“I dunno.” Coyote mused. “I’m Coyote. The Great Trickster. What’ll it do to my street cred to be going around do-goodin’?”

Rabbit took the time to snatch another blade of grass and munch slowly. “Maybe you could trick somethin’ into being right.”

“Like what?” Coyote looked puzzled.

“Like anything,” Rabbit said around a blade of grass. “Humans always seem to have some kind of trouble going on. Rushin’ here and there, frowns on their faces, not one of ‘em notices a good patch of grass in the sunshine. Figure out what one of their troubles is, and trick it into bein’ fixed.”

Coyote put his paws behind his head and leaned back onto a rock that was beginning to catch the early morning sunshine. That old Coyote glint came to his eyes, and he smiled, which always started as a smile and came out as a smirk. A Magpie landed on his knee and beamed up at him. “Worms!” After that short declaration it took off again, the chamber pot incident forgiven.

“This is gonna take some thinkin’. Some watchin’, and some thinkin’. This is gonna be good. Worthy of Ol’ Coyote.”

“No doubt,” said Rabbit as he munched. “Can’t wait to see what ya come up with. I’m in, as long as there aren’t any of those chamber pot things within throwin’ distance.”

Coyote limped into the people’s camp, doing his best to look like a decrepit old coyote. What would a decrepit old coyote do? Beg for food. That’s it—beg for food. He limped over to Red Moon, who was sitting cross legged on the ground, carefully crushing up blueberries to make blue dye. She had a pile of smooth stones in front of her, waiting

to take the dye. Coyote sat down and turned velvet eyes to her, holding up a paw. "Oh, look at you," she crooned. "Such a skinny little thing. I'll bet you are hungry. You sit right there. Don't move. I'll be right back." Coyote let his tongue slide out of his mouth and hang there gratefully.

Red moon unfolded her legs and stood up in a fluid motion. She pointed at Coyote. "You stay right there," and hurried off to her hut. She came back with a huge piece of roast bison, and placed it in front of Coyote, who wolfed it down. He didn't have to pretend to be hungry. Coyote liked to eat.

Red moon crossed her legs and lowered herself to the ground, reaching for a stone. "My husband did something very foolish" she said in a low voice "and disrespected The Great God Tlaloc. I don't even want to tell you what he did."

Coyote looked at her earnestly, holding back a threatening smirk.

"You look like you understand every word I'm saying," Red Moon remarked with a questioning gaze. "Maybe you do. Who knows the ways of the Spirits? Maybe you are one of Tlaloc's emissaries, coming to see if I will try to make up for my husband's foolishness. What I am doing, Mr. Coyote, is making a cairn of blue rocks for the honor of Tlaloc."

Coyote preened a little at the Mr. He gazed intently at Red Moon. Her faith was magnificent. Misplaced, but magnificent. An aura of contentment radiated from her. She was at peace with the god in her head. What did Coyote believe? He believed in the stars and rushing streams and a good smoke in a cool forest. It was enough. Coyote found himself tentatively holding out a paw and laying it on her shoulder, looking into her warm brown eyes. He then limped off to find out what the others were up to.

There was a group of men standing around drinking Red Moon's famous Apple Jack, laughing and punching each other in the shoulder. The drink was named after Black Jack, who had drunk himself senseless and fallen down a steep cliff. He was found miraculously unbroken, giggling at a rock. To be fair, it was a funny rock.

Dog appeared at the edge of the camp. He had acquired a small child, and was patiently trying to herd it back into the camp. His eye caught Coyote and he gave Coyote a sharp What-are-you-doing? look. The child made a break for it and the moment passed as Dog went to head it off.

Coyote spent the day limping around the camp, people watching. He would alternate begging with laying in a patch of sunshine. People were complicated. What should be was laid out right in front of them, but they couldn't see it for all of the lookin' around at things that shouldn't be. When the sun went down he limped out of the camp and into his forest, shook off the limp and pranced in the moonlight. He climbed on top of his favorite rock and lit a smoke. Something caught his eye behind the rock. He climbed down and slipped around back. A deer skin tunic was folded up neatly and placed in a niche between two rocks. Hmmmm. He would keep an eye on it.

Rabbit came hopping along, snatching a last few blades of good grass before he headed off to his burrow. "Ah, Coyote" he said "did you spend the day in the camp? Come up with anything interestin'?"

"All kinds of stuff," said Coyote. "Rabbit, that is on confused species."

"What did you do all day?"

"I acted like I was a decrepit old coyote and begged, and laid around and watched. At one point some guy kicked me—I peed on him and ran away."

“Peeing on them and running away,” Rabbit said speculatively. “Seems like a good, whatchacallit, policy to me. Find anything wrong you can trick into being right?”

“I believe I did,” Coyote said with a smirk. “Their mating habits are a mess.”

Rabbit’s whiskers quivered “How so? Seems pretty straight forward to me. Wait for mating season, find a doe, and then go eat some grass.”

“Humans don’t seem to have a mating season.”

“What!?” Rabbit squeaked. “Not even one day? How do they make more?” His ever-quivering nose had come to a dead halt, looking for all the world like a small pink question mark.

“No,” said Coyote. “Their mating season never ends. It goes on all year round.”

“Oh,” Rabbit tried to work his mind around this. “Ohhhhh. I could see where that would be—uh—trouble.”

“And they don’t just mate. They have these watchcallits, relationships. They get all tangled up with each other. Which might not be so bad if they picked the right person to get tangled up with, but their pickers seem to be broken. My mind today kept comin’ back to a fine young man and a fine young woman who just seem like they belong together. But they can’t see it. He is busy with his head in the clouds, communing with spirits that would probably just as soon be left alone, and she is obsessed with a man who seems to have his eye on other men, if ya catch my meanin’.”

The quivering nose froze. “They can do that?” “Yeah. That is why they call it relationships. Guys can be with guys, girls can be with girls. More often than not it is a guy and a girl, though,” Coyote lectured. “So I

figure if I can get these two together and point the confused guy in the right direction, I'll be doin' a watchacallit, a service."

Rabbit scratched behind his ear thoughtfully. "I'm glad I'm not a people."

"You and me both, little brother."

Dog slid out from behind a tree noiselessly, hoping to surprise Coyote. Coyote had been wondering how long Dog was going to stand behind a tree. "You in stealth mode again, Dog?"

"Just makin' sure you're not causin' trouble," Dog said. One of these days he was gonna sneak up on Coyote. Really sneak up on him. "I saw you with the people today. Don't be thinkin' that I don't notice that you eat the food that they put out for their gods."

"Don't you start getting' on me about that food, Dog. How would those people feel if they got up and the food was sitting there rotting and unappreciated, like? And you know that I don't go in for eatin' animals that talk. But I'm sure that Rabbit here has a whole bunch of cousins that appreciate not being a meal because I've already had a good dinner."

Rabbit thumped his foot and nodded his head.

"I guess I can see your point," Dog said reluctantly. "But what in the name of the gods are you doin' up there during the day, when the people are about?"

"He peed on somebody," Rabbit giggled. Coyote thumped him on the head.

"That was, like, extreme circumstances. He had it comin'," Coyote said. "I'm doin' like you said. I'm gonna try and trick somethin' into being right."

“Just you remember that I’ve got my eye on you,” Dog admonished. “Those people are my responsibility. I won’t have you causin’ trouble for ‘em.”

“No trouble, no trouble. Go on out and patrol your perimeters, Dog.”

Dog gave Coyote one last hard look and about-faced.

Coyote left Rabbit plucking the last blades of the evening grass, and went out on a ramble through the forest. Just out of curiosity, he checked behind his rock. The tunic was still neatly folded, but it had been left in a different niche. He cocked his head. Truly strange. He loped down to the stream and hopped from rock to rock, cooling his paws and following the moonlight. The forest touched his soul. If people could only see, he thought, see how things really are, feel the breeze touching their skin. They wouldn’t need a god or a relationship. The pine needles and the leafy mulch under your paws, the moonlight tracing the edge of things, the music of the water. It was just so—so—*enough*. He came around a bend and came face to face with a perfect blue rose. He had never seen a blue rose. And this one—this one seemed to carry the essence of roseness. Just ready to unfold, a velvet aqua faded into the blue of a summer sky around the edges. Coyote grinned. One more stop to make, while he was collecting dinner from the food people put out for their gods. He carefully nipped the rose off.

Red Moon’s husband, Smoky River, rolled over in his sleep and tossed a hairy arm across his wife’s face. “Grif!” Red Moon grumbled as she pushed the arm off so she could breathe. Oh well, time to get the fire started for tea anyways. She rolled over and froze. Next to her head, in a little dent in her pillow, lay a blue rose. Slowly, slowly she reached out to touch it, scared that it would disappear in a puff of blue smoke. It

remained, a velvet blue softness. She rose and moved to the piece of polished black obsidian that she used as a mirror. She carefully wove the rose into her hair. She had not begun to go grey like most women her age. Instead, she had developed one stark white streak in her hair. She believed that the blue rose and the white streak in her blue-black hair gave her a mystic quality. She found tears of gratitude rolling down her face, that her god had given her a gift to prove that he favored her. Out loud she said "I am no longer Red Moon. I am a priestess, and my name is Blue Moon."

The Magpies were getting cranky. They had stayed up all night again to get the early bird worms, and had yet to work out a sleep schedule. Coyote approached them as they were comparing shiny bits that they had collected. They had a piece of fool's gold, a bead, and a little blue painted rock that had inexplicitly ended up in the forest. After he had admired their collection, Coyote asked them if they knew anything about the deer skin tunic behind his rock. A Magpie turned one round black eyeball to Coyote and asked "Beads?" Coyote said no, no beads. The Magpie replied "Don't know. Don't care." Magpies are a single minded bunch.

Rabbit was munching grass by Coyote's rock when Coyote returned. "Still no luck figuring out what is going on with the clothes behind my rock," Coyote complained. Dog slid out from behind a tree. "You want I should set up surveillance?" Dog asked, all business. "No thanks Dog," Coyote said. "I don't know that I want you staring at my rock all day. A coyote likes his privacy. Appreciate the offer, though."

"Just as well," Dog said. "I've got to keep an eye on the camp, and the perimeters don't patrol themselves."

“I’m gonna be in the camp today doin’ some of my own surveillance, Dog. Don’t get all pushed outa shape when you see me there,” said Coyote.

Dog frowned. His face was automatically set on frown—he just let it relax into its normal position. “What’re you up to, Coyote?”

“Nothin’ that you need to concern yourself with, Dog. I’m actually tryin’ to do right by some people.” Coyote tried to look noble.

“Yeah, I’ll believe that when I see it happen. You get yourself involved in somethin’, Coyote, and it usually goes all sideways,” Dog observed.

“You’ll see. I’m just gonna work some of that Ol’ Coyote magic.”

Dog snorted and did a smart about-face, marching towards the camp. Coyote headed after him, doing some meandering, participating in that peculiar magic that the forest had to offer.

When Coyote made it to camp the day was well underway.

Red Moon—Blue Moon—was standing with her hands on her hips, staring around the camp. She caught sight of Coyote. “Mr. Coyote!” Coyote thrust his shoulders back a little, even though he was trying to act decrepit. He really like that ‘Mr.’.

“You must be hungry. Stay right there. I will get you something” she said. “Well ain’t this somethin” Coyote thought. “I’ve got somebody waitin’ on me and calling me Mr. This is turnin’ out to be a fine day”.

Blue Moon hurried out of her hut with a prime piece of ham. Coyote was in danger of drooling. She quickly put together a bed of leaves and placed the meat in front of Coyote.

“You bring me luck, Mr. Coyote. The Great God Tlaloc has chosen me to be his priestess. My name is now Blue Moon.

“Uh-oh” Coyote thought.

Blue Moon scratched him between the ears and wandered off to do whatever it is that priestesses do.

Coyote enjoyed his ham, and sat back on his haunches looking around the camp. He found Swift Wind and Rolling River, the two humans he hoped to put together. As he was observing her, Swift Wind was observing He Who Falls from Trees, frowning. She approached Trees, whose lips were a plump deep purple. “What happened to your lips, Trees?” she asked “It looks like someone hit you in the mouth.”

“Do you like it?” Trees asked hopefully.” I just painted on a little berry juice”. Swift Wind shook her head, exasperated. ‘This is the man I have to end up with a thing for’, she thought bemusedly. “Trees”, she said, trying to figure out exactly how to say this, “men don’t decorate their lips. Women decorate their lips.” Trees frowned and turned away in a huff. She could hear him muttering as he stomped off “I don’t know why women get to be the ones to do EVERYTHING!” Swift Wind sighed and went to find a rock to bang her head against.

Blue Moon had gathered the men of the camp. Coyote could hear one exclaim “You want WHAT?” She spoke softly, her hands planted firmly on her hips. Another man said “But we can’t build you a temple for your god. If we do that, all of our wives will want one.” Mumbled agreement among the men. This time Coyote could hear Blue Moon’s response. “But the other woman of the camp don’t know how to make Apple Jack, do they?”

A hush fell over the camp. The men stood there, their mouths hanging open. Children quieted, wondering what catastrophe had befallen the camp. It seemed that even the insects stopped making noise. Finally one man gathered his courage. “You would deprive us of Apple Jack if

we don't build you this temple?" "I don't know if I would look at it that way," Blue Moon said. "Well how else would you have us look at it?" "Look at it as the Apple Jack will flow and flow and flow as long as you are working on this temple," she said. "You don't even have to do the hard part. I will gather the stones, and I will paint them." She stood there with a fevered look. Coyote gazed at her, remembering the beauty of her simple faith. "Too late to take the rose back", he thought.

The camp started moving again. A laughing girl leaned back against a rock, her black hair braided and full of beads, flying behind her as she threw back her head with a full throated laugh, A Magpie stood on the rock behind her, hypnotized by the beads flying through the air. The bird bobbed up and down with the rhythm of the beads. Dog appeared across the camp, chugging after another errant child, streaked with mud, running for all he was worth.

Screams arose from the vicinity of the rocks. The Magpie had been overcome. Dazed from watching the dazzle of beads dancing through the air, he had leapt into the middle of them and gotten tangled up in the girl's braids. Her frantic screams and the bird's alarmed "Awks!" vied for attention.

Rolling River appeared out of nowhere and placed his hands on the girl's shoulders. He looked into her eyes and said, quietly, "Be still."

She let out a breath, and was still. He reached behind her and unwound her braids from the Magpie, who perched on his finger. The bird laid an errant bead on his palm. It rolled one black eye towards him, then picked up the bead and rose gracefully into the sky. "Thank you," said River to the frozen girl "for allowing me to commune with the spirit of the bird." Watching this, Swift Wind rolled her eyes and walked away, still looking for a rock to bang her head against. Men were just stupid.

Coyote sat disconsolate, pouring his heart out to Rabbit. "I didn't mean to start a darned religion I just thought it was a small thing that would make her happy."

Rabbit thought for a minute. "I don't think anybody means to start a religion. A rock falls out of the sky and hits a guy on the head and the guy says Hey—rock—the gods must have sent you. I think I will build an altar and get some people to worship you, and then all of a sudden you have The Religion of the Falling Rock. I think that is what Dog meant about everything going sideways. People are just plain weird."

Just then a nondescript bird came plummeting out of the sky towards Coyote's rock. It slowed a little, but forgot to put out its landing gear. It crashed into the rock and bounced off into the moss. It jumped up and fluffed its feathers, and glared at Coyote and Rabbit. "Not a word," It said. "Not. One. Word."

Coyote and Rabbit just stared, not saying a word. Not one word. One last glare, and the bird hopped behind the rock. It emerged as a shapely young woman wearing the deerskin tunic, waist length black hair sparkling with blue highlights, eyes an exotic shade of pale, silvery blue.

"Awww. the tunic," Coyote said. "A Shapeshifter. I don't know why I didn't think of that. Do you mind telling us, Miss, exactly what kind of bird you are?" The woman mumbled. "I didn't catch that," Coyote said. "A Cowbird!" she said forcefully, a dare in her eyes.

Rabbit's nose was a question mark again. "I've never heard of a Cowbird," he said.

"No wonder," the visitor said. "We're tricky. We lay eggs in other people's nests. For the longest time I thought I was an ugly crow. My foster mother found a bird that looked just like me and figured it out. I

mean, you would think they would leave instructions or something. Cowbirds go south for the winter. Crows don't go south, and I froze my feathers off for the first few years of my life. I just shift now and find a cozy cave and ride it out. I mean, I'm glad that I don't have to sit around on an egg, but I get permission from the host parent and I make damned sure that they know who they are raising. I check back to see if they need help with the hatchling. We now have a whole network of Crow/Cowbird Shapeshifters" she said proudly. "Although I still haven't mastered the landing," she said, sulking.

"Yeah, we, uh, noticed," said Coyote. "Do you have a name, or do you go by Cowbird?"

"Riva," she said. "There are too many of us to go by Cowbird. We tried for a while. Cowbird with red ruff. Cowbird with white patch on left third toe. It got to be silly. I am just Riva."

"Well Riva, I am just Coyote. I am the only Coyote who speaks in these parts. Another one comes along, we'll figure it out."

"Anybody know what is up with the funny dude sitting in the stream dribbling water over his head?" Riva questioned.

Coyote sighed. "Rolling River."

Rabbit said "Ahhhhh—one of Coyote's special projects."

"Is Coyote teaching him to bathe?" asked Riva.

Coyote thought for a moment. "River likes to--commune. He communes with the spirit of water. He communes with the spirit of stone. There are countless spirits that Rolling River communes with. I don't believe that any of them commune back. I am currently trying to figure out how to introduce River to the world of flesh."

“I take it that you are trying to do this without letting him find out that you talk?” Riva asked.

“Oh gods,” Coyote shuddered. “He can’t find out. He would be tethered to my neck for all eternity.”

“Maybe I can be of some help,” Riva offered.

Coyote brightened. “You know, I just might take you up on that.” A dark thought passed. “Don’t, under any circumstances, let him think that he is falling in love with you. He is meant for Swift Wind.”

It was Riva’s turn to shudder. “Riva stands alone. No man is bird enough for me. No bird is man enough for me. I mate once a year and lay an egg in some crow’s nest and get it over with. Even friends are tricky.”

“I hear ya,” said Coyote. “I don’t have the whole inter-species business going on, but it is hard to be with a woman who doesn’t talk. I end up having both sides of the conversation just to hear some words. ‘Hi Dear, how did your day go? Anything special happen?’ ‘Nothing much, Dear. Wandered around, sniffed some things, peed on some things. I stuffed myself before the sun came up with food left out for the gods, so I didn’t have to hunt.’ ‘That’s nice, Dear. Killing things always makes so much of a mess.’ You know what I mean. She just cocks her head and looks at me as if I was insane. Then the pups come. I try to keep myself from hoping that one will talk, but I always hope. And I’m always disappointed. I mean, I love them, kids are a blast. It would just be nice to have a conversation with one of them.” Coyote looked thoughtful, gazing into the middle distance. “Maybe someday,” he added.

Riva watched Coyote, thinking about what he was saying. She said “I don’t have your communication problems, I can talk and tweet until my face falls off. I just don’t have the give and take that is involved with being in a relationship. I don’t want to owe my time to anyone. Not

even kids—that is the one thing I like about being a Cowbird, not being tied down by an egg. When I want to fly, I fly.”

“And crash into things,” Rabbit mumbled around a blade of grass.

“What was that, Fur Face?” Riva muttered darkly.

“Nothin, nothin,” Rabbit said as he took a hop back. “Don’t pay any attention to me. No one does.”

“So,” Riva said, glancing at Coyote, “Intrigue.” The lights in her silvery eyes flashed. “Do you have a plan in mind for the boy whose mind wanders around communing with things that aren’t there?”

“I’m not saying that the spirits aren’t there,” said Coyote. “I figure everything has a spirit. I just think that going around talking at them all of the time is a bunch of nonsense. It’s like introducing yourself to your fur every time you go to groom yourself. Just existing is all the communing you need to do. I mean, think about it. My spirit is constantly weaving in and out and around your spirit, and the spirit of that tree over there, and the spirit of the beetle crawling over your foot.” Riva glanced down and shook the beetle from her foot. “None of us have to DO anything about it. It just is,” Coyote continued.

“Wow, Coyote,” Rabbit said slowly “that is – uh – deep.” Rabbit shook his head as if to settle his brain, and went back to munching on grass.

“As far as Rolling River goes,” Coyote continued “I haven’t come up with anything firm. Suggestions are welcome. Somehow or another we need to convince him that the spirits don’t want all of that communing going on. Then we need to convince him that communing with Swift Wind would probably be a good thing.”

Riva turned her face to the sunlight. “Tell me about Swift Wind,” she said.

Coyote gazed inward, gathering a mental picture. "Swift Wind is a fine girl, strong and womanly, fast, good head on her shoulders except for when it comes to men. She is in a relationship with a guy who likes other guys, and neither one of them seems to notice that inconvenient fact."

"Ah," Riva said "one of those."

Coyote gave her a sharp look. "Do you have a problem with 'one of those'?"

"No! Not at all," Riva looked insulted. "With the issues I have, I'm gonna look down on someone else?" she inquired. "As a matter of fact, a lot of the crows believe that men who are 'one of those' have a tendency towards being Shamans."

Coyote gazed inward again, and shook his head. "Nah. I can't see He Who Falls from Trees bein' any kind of Shaman. For one thing, he really does fall from trees. He keeps climbin', and he keeps fallin'. His name used to be somethin' else, and they changed it because he won't stay out of trees. For another, he would be kind of a silly Shaman. He doesn't concern himself with spiritual type matters. He prances around a lot and tries to make his lips look all poofy without Swift Wind noticing. It really is a wonder that neither one of them has figured it out."

"I catch my mind startin' to go all odd when I am in human shape for too long," Riva observed. "It's like, when you're thinking about things, you're not thinking of them as they really are. You are thinking of them as they are as they are makin' their way through who you are. Does that make any sense? When I'm a cowbird, the world is the way it is. When I am human, at least for too long, the world is the way I am."

Rabbit shook his head again. “You two are getting’ all deep again. I’m gonna hop on over to the shallow end.” He hopped off to some sunlit clover.

Coyote closed his eyes and lifted his muzzle to the sky. “It is good to be a simple coyote. To feel the breeze on my fur and the damp earth under my paws. Humans seem to forget the simple things and fall all over themselves going after the complicated things.”

Riva said, “I’m guilty of that when I stay in human shape. I walk through the forest and I don’t notice the forest. I think of all the things that might happen when I get where I’m going, and how I might react to those things, and so on and so forth til the end of time. It’s exhausting. And my cave. Instead of just taking refuge and appreciating the warmth of the furs, I think about all the ways I might make it better.”

From his patch of clover, one of Rabbit’s ears stood up. “Furs? What furs? You never said anything about furs. Who’s furs?”

“Relax, Rabbit”, Riva said. “I don’t take a fur until a brother or sister is done with it, until it is a thing that hunters leave behind.”

Somewhat mollified, Rabbit went back to his clover. He just didn’t trust anything on two legs, unless it had wings. He didn’t know what to make of a thing that went back and forth between legs and wings. It wasn’t right somehow.

Riva told Coyote “Let me do some thinking on this, while I’m busy being a human. When I’m a cowbird all that I’m good for is collecting bits of fluff to give to the crows for their nests.”

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Riva had an idea. She refused to say a word about it until she had shown Coyote and Rabbit a particular spot. In single file they wound their way through trees and vines, picking up barely discernable paths. Coyote and Rabbit grumbled their way through a patch of thorns and rocks and cursed Riva. "Oh be quiet," she said. "I could be a Cowbird and be through here in an instant, I am remaining in my human shape out of respect for you. If I can do it, you can do it."

Once they pushed through the last of the thorns, the world opened up. The sound they had been hearing resolved itself into a mighty waterfall. It fell hundreds of feet over glistening black rocks, white and foamy, crashing into a pool that eddied and spun with all of the colors of the rainbow. Flowers had taken hold in patches of dirt in the rocks on the way down, bursting and thriving in the mists from the falls, their perfume mingling with the mist. Sunlight was caught and held in thousands of prisms. It was a truly awesome sight. The animals stood transfixed, unwilling to move and break the spell.

"The spirit of water," Riva said quietly.

"And how," breathed Coyote.

"Come," Riva said. "Let me show you something."

She slipped behind some shining black rock, and under a low natural threshold. Following, Coyote and Rabbit found themselves in a cave awash with watery light. "Say something," Riva said in a low voice.

Coyote cocked an ear. "Like What?"

LIKE WHAT echoed through the cave in a deep, resonant voice, a voice that could belong to the gods. The words thundered through the cave, and out through the waterfall.

Coyote yipped and jumped back, ears pinned, landing on his butt. Rabbit snickered quietly. Coyote glared and Rabbit pulled his head into his chest, all innocence. He would have looked for grass to munch, but he was in a cave.

Riva's mouth curved in half of a smile. Keeping her voice low, she said "The boy wants to commune, we will give him a communion he will never forget. Think carefully about what kind of point you want to make. Keep it short and simple. I will turn into a bird, and get him here. You will make your point."

Coyote's eyes gleamed, and he gave Riva an appreciative, feral grin.

Coyote knew that he would have to put some deep thinkin' into this. He could wrap the whole human problem up in one go. Well, everything except for Blue Moon. That one was a misfire. He did not know how to de-religion somebody.

Riva took off for a few days to shake her humanity off and collect fluff for nests, and keep an eye out for shiny bits for the crows. They got so excited over their shiny bits.

Rabbit knew that Coyote was the one to do the thinking, and he was content to laze in the sun and munch grass and think about what a lucky rabbit he was. He knew his brothers and sisters had it rough, hiding and running from predators. Sometimes getting caught—that did not bare thinking about. He and Coyote had an odd sense of kinship. Coyote would not eat him, and no other coyote would dare poach on his Coyote's territory.

Coyote wouldn't let on that he was troubled. He knew that he was going to mess with someone's mind. His intentions were good, and he would be very, very careful, but when all was said and done, he was still messing with someone's mind. Then he relaxed. He was Coyote, and Coyote was all about getting over on someone. He had just never tried to make things turn out good for people, and it was kind of weird. Things had turned out good, at times, but in a very twisted way. It was all left to the people that he gave his tricks to, to their intentions and leanings. He ruefully thought about Blue Moon losing her sweet glow of spirituality and determined that things would turn out right for these young people.

Point one—Rolling River was totally missing out on life in the real world, sitting in the river and dripping water on his head. Who did that? Coyote had to somehow turn Rolling River's thoughts to the world of the flesh, particularly the sweet flesh of Swift Wind.

Point two—He Who Falls from Trees had to be brought to the realization that his affections lie with other men, freeing himself up for true happiness and freeing Swift Wind up for someone worthy of her, namely Rolling River. If he could quit dripping water on his head.

*

After a few days of pointedly not thinking about it and losing himself in the ritual and enchantment of the forest, Coyote found answers seeping into his mind. Rolling River needed to commune, and needed to stop communing. Both at the same time. Coyote did not want to mess with any gods hovering about by turning Rolling River away from the sacred. The chamber pot incident was still fresh in his, and everybody else's, mind.

He walked until he could feel the sap rise through the trees. The ground was a living being beneath his paws. He saw clearly—so clearly—how this could go. Of course, human beings being the contrary things they are, things could always go sideways. However it went, though, it was bound to be interesting.

Coyote put out the word that he wanted to see Riva. The other animals he could round up, but who knew what rock Riva was crashing into?

Ah—by the time he got back to his rock and struck a match, here comes Riva. He winced as she landed hard and skidded into the rock. “You need to make yourself some kind of crash test dummy suit,” Coyote eyed her warily. She didn’t take his kind of constructive criticism well. “Ha,” she said drily, “ha”.

Suddenly a dozen Magpies zeroed in on tree branch that giant ferns reached to. Then a dozen more. They built their nests in a different place each year, which meant they lost all the precious bits of string and shiny glass that they had collected each season. Finding an old nest lit their little world up. One by one Coyote and Riva watch them fly off, laden with odd bits of shiny things. Some wobbled as they flew.

“I don’t think that we can count on them for anything,” Riva was already changed into a person, here arms crossed in front of herself.

“I’m not countin on them for nothin,” said Coyote. I’m countin on you, mostly, to lure him to the waterfall.”

“No!” Riva was enraged. “Weren’t you the one telling me not to get involved with him in any way?”

“As a bird, Dufus.” Coyote explained. “The boy thinks he has a special relationship with birds. If you get his attention and *actually* lead him to the waterfall, he will think he is in the midst of great magic.”

“Those are awful fancy words, Coyote”.

“I can talk when I need to. I’ll have to admit, though,” he turned his head so his eye could stare at her “the most intelligent conversation I’ve ever had has been with you.”

Riva was glad that her dusky skin could hide the blood rushing through her face. She had felt worthless for so long. First, she was an ugly Crow. Then she was a Cowbird that knew nothing of the customs. As a human, she was woefully inadequate. She didn’t feel that there was one being on the planet who could relate to her. Now here was Coyote, telling her that he enjoyed her conversation.

“I like speaking with you, Coyote, although you can get rather twisted. I think that I like that about you, though. I’ll crash into your rock, now and again, and you feel free to stop by my cave.”

“I don’t have a clue where your cave is, Mystery Woman” Coyote drawled.

Riva hopped down off the rock “C’mon”.

The cave was in an ingenious place, across a raging stream that no one had ever tried to cross. Riva had built a bridge of stones barely under the surface. She took her moccasins off and stepped across, Coyote her. Behind a thick curtain of brush was a homey room, maybe 30’ x 30’. Not large, but the ceilings were high enough that Riva didn’t hit her head. There was a convenient smoke hole, baffled so that water didn’t enter. The cave looked like it had been in use for generations. Nooks had been lovingly carved in places, calling for scared objects to fill them. Candles were lit to dancing shadows.

Coyote frowned. Candles. Animal fat. He looked at Riva and raised an eyebrow.

“Only the ones who were already dead, Coyote. I take what the hunters leave behind, and I thank the spirit of the animal for giving me light and warmth. I swear it on my honor as a Cowbird. Now tell me what we are doing.”

*

An hour later found Coyote, Rabbit and Dog hidden behind the waterfall. Dog shook his head mournfully. “I don’t like this, Coyote. We are” – he lowered his voice – “beyond the perimeters”.

“Don’t worry, Ol’ Dog,” said Coyote “this here thing we’re doin will put Rolling River straight back into the perimeters. I know you have trouble with that, with Rolling River up and following spirits around all of the time.”

Dog peered out from his bushy eyebrows suspiciously. “Since when did you care about my problems?”

“I know how seriously you take your perimeters, Dog. We’re on it.

Riva flittered around the corner and lit on a rock, Rolling River stumbling behind her, dazed. Coyote thought she made a damned cute cowbird.

Riva flitted back to pluck on River’s tunic, leading him to the exact spot they had picked out.

River’s eyes were round as saucers. Coyote started his spiel. The cavern behind the waterfall magnified his voice and rolled the echo around until a simple sentence sounded like an otherworldly pronouncement.

“You have proved yourself, Rolling River. You have been communing with one spirit at a time, and not living your life.”

”Oh!” said Rolling River ”that is my life!”

“No,” Coyote said, “it is not. When you are dead, you can spend all day and night chatting with spirits. You are of the flesh. When you feel the need to feel the spirits, immerse yourself in this waterfall. We are all here. There are two people back at the camp that need you. He Who Falls from Trees, you may have noticed, is inclined less toward women than men in romance”.

“Yeah, me and the rest of the camp have noticed. All except him and Swift River.

“You can help him know this,” Coyote said “so that he can live an authentic life.”

“But what about Swift Wind?” River worried.

“Ah, Swift Wind”. He tried to keep the leer out of his voice—spirits did not leer. “She will need a good man. Like a man who is strong and clever enough to find the spirits.”

Dog and Rabbit had been talking softly in the background, sibilant words that could be almost, but not quite, worked out

Coyote said “We must rest, Child. We are always here, though. You will not hear our voices again until you are a spirit. Now go do what you have been charged with.

*

Dog showed up at camp early and right away had children to herd. Swift Wind was decorating her tent. Her friends were gathered and she was chatting “I LOVE being single! I get the whole bed! I don’t have to check in in the morning to find out what kind of mood we are in!”.

Puzzled, Dog looked towards River’s tent. Just inside, he could glimpse Trees and River feeding each other strawberries. He smiled as only a dog can smile.

A scream came from Blue Moon's tent. She stood and stared, hand on her throat. On her pillow lay a thorny, black rose. In the forest, Coyote smiled.

