

New Beginnings

A Tale of The Chakats of Long Lane Farm Annapolis Valley, GNA, 2238

It was Christmas eve. In the Vaillancourt household, like so many homes of Christians over the centuries, Christmas was an occasion for both a religious observance mixed in with a celebration of family, friends, and the fruits of their labours.

Over the days and weeks leading up to this occasion, all the members of the family had worked in their own ways to prepare for the celebrations. Gifts were readied and wrapped. Some purchased, and some made with the hands of the giver. The home was decorated, adding bright colours and shiny baubles to a home that was always filled with love, although sometimes not as ordered as it might be.

Even the stables had seen their share of care, with every corner scrubbed and cleaned.

Harness was looking its best, repairs made where needed, the leather conditioned and polished until it shone. The horses, tough little Canadian horses called by some the little iron horse, watched all the preparations. They were not above enjoying the extra brushings, and the odd ribbon woven into their manes, the fresh straw in their stalls, the apples that were their special treats. They would bob their heads, as if agreeing that all this was their due. And after all, was this not a holiday celebrating an event that had occurred in a stable all those centuries before? Surely too they were as much a part of the family as the human members? Had they not shared their fortunes, good and bad, adding their strength to the common good for the last five centuries?

Jean-Paul made last checks on the vintages he had chosen for the celebrations this year. Wines, which along with the horses, were the pride of their farm. Reds, whites, blushes, sparkling wines, made with love and pride. Hard ciders and perry's made from the fruit of the trees tended by their Chakat neighbours.

Neighbours who would be joining them soon for dinner, to stay the night and share in their Christmas day.

Not far away four Chakats were dressed to step out their door. Titania, Oberon, Puck, Peaseblossom – the names they chose to use now, if not the names they were given by their sires and dames – were showing signs of impatience.

Oberon in a tone that was half a growl called up to the stairs, “Moth, get your tail down here now. We need to get going or we're going to be stumbling about in the snow and the dark.”

“Coming ...” as shi bounded down the stairs stuffing a last item in hir pannier.

“Careful, love,” as hir growl softened. Moth gave hir a passing kiss as shi grabbed hir cloak, soft boots, and settled hir panniers over the part of the cloak that covered hir lower body.

They set off into the early dusk for the short walk to their neighbours. Moving almost silently, the

predator genes that had gone into their construction only part of the reason. The soft boots which wrapped their toes only contacting a layer of snow, their footsteps in the snow the only thing that marked their passage.

After a few minutes they crossed over from their land to that of the Vaillancourts. Several more minutes and they could see the lights of the main house. They trotted up to the main door, illuminated by a pair of lamps flanking it. Titania knocked on the door, and a few seconds went by, until it was opened by Jean-Paul.

“Come in Mesdames – don't let the cold in! Come, Come!”

“Thank you Jean-Paul,” they chorused. Stepping inside the five Chakats shed their cloaks, and pulled off the felt boots that covered their paws and hand-paws. Although they enjoyed the chilly weather, the cloaks kept their fur dry despite the rising winds. Winds that were starting to turn the snow from a lazy fall of flakes to a driving wall of snow. The boots keeping balls of ice from forming between their toes. The panniers that had been on their backs were set aside, all bulging in ways that made the Vaillancourt children speculate at their contents.

“Come my friends, come into the parlour, warm yourselves by the fire. Enjoy a glass or two until dinner is ready.” The Chakats followed their host into the parlour, introductions were made, many hugs were exchanged – well, Chakats, after all. Refreshments served, and everyone found a seat – or a taur pad where most appropriate. A pleasant conversation occupied the group while Jean-Paul hurried off to aid in the preparations for dinner. After a few minutes Jean-Paul returned along with his wife Marie. For the moment, nothing was needed but to wait for the cooking goose to reach temperature, all the other last minute items ready to be cooked at the correct moment.

“Now, my friends, are you ready to sing for your supper?” for it was a tradition of the household that visitors would contribute a song to the merriment of the evening. The Chakats were prepared, and after taking a deep breath, began to sing (***).

A ray of hope flitters in the sky
A tiny star lights up way up high
All across the land dawns a brand new morn
This comes to pass
When children are born

As they sang, Jean-Paul and Marie started to smile at each other, starting to guess at the meaning behind the song that the Chakats had chosen.

Puck stepped forward, reciting a verse that made the humans smile all the wider:

... Waiting for children
their fur colour, no one knows
But children that will grow up
And turn tears to laughter
Hate to love, war to peace ...

The Chakats sang the last few words:

It's all a dream and illusion now
It must come true, sometimes soon somehow
All across the land dawns a brand new morn
This comes to pass
When children are born

“Dear friends, is this an announcement?” Marie asked after the applause for their song had ended.

“Yes, yes it is. Jean-Paul, Marie, friends one and all. We take great pleasure in asking you to attend our birthing parties next year. We'll send out the notifications when we're closer to the dates.”

“Dates? Just how many of you are pregnant?” asked Marie.

With a slightly sheepish look, but with a hint of a grin, Puck answered, “Uh, all of us?”

Madame Vaillancourt sat back into her chair, and whispered “Mon Dieu!” In a louder voice she asked, “How did this happen?” Fortunately she noticed the a grin starting to form on Puck's face, and before she could open her mouth, and provide far too detailed an explanation, she held up her hand. “Non, non, never mind, I'm a married woman after all. *When* did this happen?”

“Around the autumnal equinox – plus or minus, you know how it goes.”

An expression of understanding lit up Jean-Paul's face. “That wouldn't have been the same time that you told me that all that late night yowling I heard was traditional Chakat harvest songs, would it?”

Oberon, with a hint of a self conscious shuffle, answered “No, no, that was ... well yes, actually, that was just when it happened. We came to our decision that we were ready at last. Chakats often try to have their kits in a group so that they will be siblings to each other, so, we were 'celebrating' our decision. A lot. And some Chakats 'celebrate' very loudly indeed.” which was punctuated with a sharp glance at Puck and Moth. For their part, they were trying to look like butter wouldn't melt in their mouths – which eventually had all the adults laughing.

A few minutes passed in warm conversation, until a cold draught came around the archway of the parlour from the direction of the front door, shortly followed by a loud bang as the door hit the stop.

“Anne-Marie, have you been playing with the door again?”

“No, papa,” a young voice called from the hallway.

“Well, please close the door, in any case, mon petite.”

A few instants later the same voice shrieked “PAPA!” which propelled everyone to their feet and running towards the front door.

Just beyond the door, a hooded figure was silhouetted against the almost complete darkness. The figure stepped forward, now illuminated by the lights bracketing the doorway. It instantly changed from a threatening figure, to that of a handsome if slightly pale human. Of a youngish aspect, but with a face that never quite seemed to allow the eye to settle and fully take in what it looked at. Some might say it

was because it was so beautiful that the mind couldn't take it in.

“My apologies, I'm sorry to scare you. I got lost with the sunset being so early, and then I saw your lights, and hoped that you could set me on the correct path. I was just about to step up to your door when it started to swing open – it must have been a gust of wind.”

Jean-Paul was taken back for a moment by this stranger, but then his genial nature and his pleasure in being the generous host came back to him.

“But of course, monsieur. Please let me welcome you to my home, and hearth. Come inside, get warm, you may tell us your tale and we will help you find your path.”

As the stranger stepped in Anne-Marie stepped back against the wall to let him pass, one small hand gripping her golden cross hanging about her neck, her eyes wide. In passing, the stranger gave her a wink, which seemed to calm her.

“My name is Matthew – Matthew Fisher.”

“Please come with me, we'll get you warm. We have our friends over for dinner this evening, would you do us all the honour of joining us for dinner? With the storm coming up, you really must stay until daylight before setting out again.”

Matthew was led to the parlour and introductions were made. When he was introduced to the Chakats, they each in turn reached out with their empathic sense. In turn, each were calmed by a sense of peace and goodness flowing from this stranger.

After he had warmed himself by the fire, and been given a drink to create a little inner fire, everyone asked if he too would sing for his supper, as was the practice of the home.

Standing, he composed himself, and began to sing. Afterwards, no one could quite remember what it was he sang, nor could they repeat it, but all agreed it was very beautiful. So beautiful, it was as if the notes had reached down into their souls, and washed away every hurt that life had given them. Nothing left, but a joy for all things. For the families, and five small lives growing inside their mother's bellies, it was a perfect moment.

Waking up from the dream of that moment, the adult Vaillancourts retired to the kitchen for the last minute preparations while everyone else moved to their places around the table. A little shuffling ensued as one more place setting was added, by which time the first of the evening's courses were emerging from the kitchen.

After consuming their fill, with high praise for the talents of those who prepared their meal, the young ones were bundled off to bed. The adults retired to the parlour again, for a final chat and a night cap before seeking their own beds.

“So, does this bountiful crop of kittens have anything to do with the reactors going into production last summer?” enquired Jean-Paul when the conversation paused.

“Yes, it was the final step that we needed to be really sure that we could make it here. Long enough for us to finally raise a family,” confirmed Puck. “We'd finally have a reliable source of power, with

enough to spare that we could go ahead with the greenhouse we've wanted from when we first moved here."

"It just wasn't possible to get good yield from the Zinc-Phosphorus nano-photovoltaics. We know how to do them a lot better than in the 21st century, and it's nice to have a cheap and easy spray-on material, but there's only so much area you can cover. I swear Moth was looking at spraying in onto us, if we didn't keep moving."

"It really started to come together when we were able to negotiate with the wolftaurs to use the abandoned iron mine on their property. It was that which finally gave us a good location for our needs, for them, and for you."

"All that effort - never was a commercial iron mine here like in Torbrook or Clementsvale, or gold like Renfrew and Rawdon, but someone was optimistic enough to try to find ore. That left us tunnels that could be upgraded to house the reactor".

Jean-Paul looked puzzled, "I thought one of the reasons that LiFTR's were never popular was that you needed a lot of fissionable materials to get them started?"

"Oh yes, that was a problem, in a way", Titania allowed with a hesitation in hir voice. The other Chakats looked sideways at hir, with attempts at looking completely innocent, with varying degrees of success, on their faces.

Puck, with that grin that was never far from hir, filled the growing silence, "You could say we had a lot of 'donations' to the cause. After the Gene Wars there was a lot of fissionable stuff lying around, some of it in the hands of groups that you really wouldn't want to have such stuff. So Tania spoke with some of hir friends, and they were able to get a lot of contributions. Of course, a few of the contributors don't know of their donations."

"And I still say if our contributors think they have their stockpiles intact, they won't go looking for more," interjected Titania. "Secrets are most easily kept when you can't reveal them even accidentally." There was a hint of long habit at keeping secrets in hir eyes.

"Tania, I swear you think twice about giving an answer if someone asks for the time of day," Puck answered with hint of exasperation in hir voice. Titania closed hir mouth, and gestured for Puck to continue.

"Tania, I know you still have reservations about all this..."

"No, not any more. I had to convince my hearts to listen to my mind. You know why, you remember what happened. Shi ... " Hir eyes filled with tears from the memory, but shi continued talking now to the others in the room, "Well, when you have massive doses of radiation, it's like your body is already dead and decaying, but it hasn't told your mind ..." The memories stilled hir voice for a moment.

Hir eyes hardened, with a look that would make the strongest person quail if it was directed at them. "With every kilo of fissionables I take out of the hands of someone who would do evil, I fulfill my pledge to hir."

Matthew stood up and walked over to Titania, and embraced hir. Titania hugged back, and after a few

moments the pain and the anger in his eyes seemed to flow away.

Jean-Paul and Marie stood, which seemed to signal to everyone it was time for sleep. The Chakats were given the room with the large taur bed, the two legged guests to rooms with regular beds. Matthew thanked his hosts for welcoming a stranger. He would be off with first light to continue his interrupted journey.

All too soon it seemed it was morning again.

Jean-Paul arose early – even before the children who would be eager to rise this morning. Matthew was already awake and dressed, the door to the guest room open, waiting on the light of dawn to make his departure. Despite Jean-Paul's offers he took only an apple and a muffin with him as his breakfast to eat on his way.

“Are you sure you don't want me to contact your friends in Wolfville to watch out for you?”

“No thank you, Jean-Paul. This is a surprise visit, and I know my way now that the sun is up. Thank you for your hospitality in such a godly home – it is a lift for my spirits having spent the night with you. Blessings be upon you all for your kindness.”

“Thank you Matthew, I've always tried to be a good man, and a godly man. The way you talk – you're not a priest are you, if I may ask?”

He chuckled, “No, no, Jean-Paul. I'm not a priest – let's just say I have a lot of friends who are, and it rubs off when you're around them.”

With a final handshake, Matthew stepped through the door and Jean-Paul closed it behind him. There were things that needed be readied for Marie as the family and guests would be coming down for breakfast soon.

Anne-Marie came rushing down into the kitchen, looking about.

“Papa, is Matthew gone already?”

“Yes, ma petite, He had far to go today. Come, I'll show you his footsteps in the snow if you think I'm tricking you.”

Picking her up, he carried her to the door. Opening the front door they could see footsteps leading away. To his surprise, only a handful of footprints could be seen leading away from the front door, and then ceasing.

“Huh, the wind must be stronger than I thought – the snow has already filled in his footprints!”

As Anne-Marie poked her head around the edge of the door, and saw the footprints end, she smiled with the innocence of the very young. It made perfect sense to her – after all why would you tread through the snow when you had wings? Such pretty wings they had been too – golden, with a faint glow – although no one had commented on them. Just like the ones she so admired on the drawings of angels she was shown in church, But in a universe with morphs as well as humans and the other star-faring races, wings must be as common as anything else, no?

A couple of hours passed with everyone waking, having breakfast, and settling down to the serious business of opening presents. Jean-Paul heard the communication panel chiming, and stepped away to answer the call. At first he was a bit perplexed, seeing that it was the local priest in Wolfville.

“Hello, Father, how are you on this fine day. Don't tell me you're calling all your parishioners to make sure they'll attend mass tonight?”

“No, no, Jean-Paul, I'm calling to set your mind at ease that Matthew found his way here. He wanted to make sure you weren't worrying about him.”

“Oh, he's your friend. He was very mysterious about who he was visiting. I'm glad he found his way. He's an old friend of yours?”

The face of the priest in the communication panel's display took on a funny expression. “I guess you could say that – a friend of the church for many years.” With a glance over his shoulder, he continued “I must go now – see you all this evening. Blessings on you all, my son. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Father.”

*** adapted from "When a Child is Born" by Zacar and Bembo, English lyrics by Fred Jay

LiFTR – Liquid Flouride Thorium Reactor

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