

Rattlesnake Trail

The timber rattlesnake glided over the outcrop, intent on satisfying a growing hunger. Morning sun glistened on the burnt orange stripe tracking a line down his stout body. His triangular head sought a large crevice on the outcrop's edge, giving access to the rock face below. Deep into the crack the snake fed his winding body, moving ever downward, until at last even his thorny rattle disappeared. As the fissure narrowed, the snake pushed outward to the rock face, following a slim ledge plunging downward.

He knew the way.

For some years the snake had hunted this woodland territory, leaving when the small rodents declined in number and returning when they rose. The mice, chipmunks, and rats on which he fed were also foods of his competitors, the hawks and owls. And too often these opponents sought the same warm morsel. How many times had the patient rattler waited, coiled by some path, only to lose his meal to a greedy hawk or owl?

Down he slid to where the rock lip tapered into the cliff side, directly above an alcove holding a hawk nest. With broad head dipping into the open space of the recess, the snake sensed heat. And as this heat pulled him nearer, the vertical

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pupils of his eyes fastened onto the downy white fluff of big-eyed hatchlings.

Claire had not noticed the snake descending toward the nest, a huge cradle of sticks lined with soft strips of bark. It lay tucked within a deep ledge, fifteen feet from the surface of the rock formation known as the Finger. From her position on the neighboring outcrop, the Fist, she might easily have seen him through her binoculars but for watching elsewhere. The subject of her study was the female Red-tailed Hawk that she and her friend Victor called Ku-Khain, a Cochiti word for the color red. Her friend Victor, half Pueblo Indian, had given the hawk this beautiful, secret name. Locals called the enormous raptor Big Red.

Not allowed to go alone to the outcrop, Claire went anyway. And if asked simply omitted reference to time spent there. After all, she was almost 12 and certainly old enough to take care of herself. Besides, who else would daily accompany her to this isolated spot in the woods? No one—because no one cared for Ku-Khain as much as she.

Ku-Khain had flown from her mothering tasks at the cliff side nest in response to her mate's call. He had a tender young gray squirrel, freshly killed, to give her. A much smaller hawk, the male awaited his female on the highest horizontal branch of a dying oak. This oak, rooted in a nearby precipice, was a favorite perching site for the pair because it provided an expansive view for hunting and quick access to their nest.

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After the food transfer, while she ate, he would return to the hatchlings.

As Ku-Khain grabbed the squirrel from her mate, the timber rattler wound his thick, long body around the unattended nest. And as Claire breathlessly watched the female eviscerate the squirrel, the snake dislocated his jaw to accommodate one of her three downy chicks.

His mate hungrily eating, the male hawk (named Hakanyi for “fire”) launched into the sky to head back to the nest. Claire paid him no mind, too absorbed in the blood feast of Ku-Khain, until—

Tsee eee arrr!!!

A scream of defiance pierced the air.

Spotting the predator, Hakanyi dove with folded wings toward the nest, rearing up and back to grab the intruder as the snake struck toward the pulse of his pounding wings. Both talon and fang missed their marks.

Ku-Khain dropped her squirrel and launched into battle flight as Claire fumbled the binoculars down the bridge of her nose. Pulling these again to her eyes, she rushed forward to follow the hawk’s trajectory, unaware of her position so near the cliff edge. A couple strides more and her foot would drop through the air. She took a lunging step with her right foot just as her left ankle gave out and so stumbled forward. With outstretched arms she sought to break the fall, but her bracing limbs plunged beyond the cliff’s edge. She saw the ground 30

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feet below within the frame of her extended arms and thought, “I’m going to die.”

Her chest slammed against the rock’s surface, knocking all breath from her lungs. For some seconds she lay, stunned, her head, shoulders and arms hanging limp over the cliff side. Insensitive to the world about her, Claire did not then witness the life and death struggle between the hawks and the snake. Neither did the female hawk note the draping form of an adolescent girl, past whom she had sped an instant before combat.

Flapping heavily to gain altitude for a second strike, Hakanyi lost his opportunity to Ku-Khain, who swooped past with a searing scream and a gush of air. Like the male, she reared back, extending her talons as the rattler sprang toward a muscular leg, fangs targeting flesh. Ku-Khain caught the streaking flash in a crushing claw and, pulling back, drew the snake’s entire length free of the rock shelf. Instantly, the hawk sank downward, as an anchor in the sea. Clutched only by the head, the snake thrashed his stout, long body in the open air. Ku-Khain tried to gain altitude but continued to sink with the weight of her cargo until the male dove beneath to seize the snake by its mid-section. With burden distributed, the two headed upward and toward their oak perch to finish the killing job.

Flying with the snake strung between, the two hawks reached an altitude equal to that of Claire’s prostrate body and passed only feet from her uplifting head. What passed before

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her unfocused eyes appeared absurd: two huge prehistoric birds carrying a glistening bronze garland through a beautiful blue sky. The dazed girl closed her eyes and opened them to look again, only to see the more distant birds wrestling this same garland, one end of which was dropped. An instant later, the garland was toppling earthward.

Claire's head dropped and for several more moments she lay draped like something dead over the cliff's edge. When again she roused, her body felt pain and her mind tried to decipher the reason. She looked downward to the distant ground and its scrubby vegetation and then noted the arms hanging by her head like a Raggedy Ann doll. She raised her head but not the heavy arms rooting her to the rock face.

Now she felt her lungs struggling to fill fully with air and her rib cage pressing against an immovable surface. She felt the binocular strap cutting across her cheek. With each recognized sensation, her mind supplied a fragment of memory until an image of what happened filled her mind. She panicked. Adrenalin surged through her body. Hoisting her head and shoulders, she braced elbows against the cliff edge. Using more will than strength, she inched herself backward, wiggling side to side, until clear of the overhang.

While the girl lay recovering on the rock face, the mated hawks had returned to the hatchlings. The male hopped on to the nest's edge to deliver a morsel of raw meat as Ku-Khain, now perched atop the outcrop, watched the snow-headed human squirming atop the neighboring rock.

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The female hawk did not fear or distrust the snow-headed one, though her new mate did. Daily he dove at the girl, screaming defiance at her presence on the neighboring outcrop. But with each attack, the human intruder simply ducked to the ground, covering herself with a dense yet removable hide. Such scenes played out again and again until finally he tired of the repetition and chose instead to watch her with steely eyes.

Aching and scared, Claire finally rose to her knees and then to her feet, walking unsteadily off the outcrop. In the slow march through the woods toward home she had much to occupy her mind. In the distance, a fast-plodding black and white shaggy hulk moved through a green world. So precisely timed were her dog's arrivals, Claire wondered if the sheepdog couldn't somehow read her mind. For they had reached an agreement: to arrive and leave together but otherwise go their separate ways. And no matter how long she stayed at the outcrop, somehow Sammy always returned in time to intercept her path on the way out.

With Sammy again Claire felt better, though stiff, and began to attend to the sounds of singing birds. The high choir of dawn had ended hours since, yet many songsters whistled or trilled their tunes from the canopies of newly leaved trees.

Claire was an avid birder but even more—she kept birds in her heart. And with its every beat, her heart broadcast a love so strong that birds were drawn to it. At least that's how she understood it. So Claire wasn't surprised to hear the buzzy

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whistling phrases of a Scarlet Tanager, especially since a pair of these birds adorned her chartreuse sweatshirt. Whether mere coincidence or something more . . . whatever bird Claire wore on her clothing was certain to appear to her that same day in flesh or in song.

Turning homeward, she withdrew into the fortress of her mind, walking without seeing or hearing, focused entirely on her thoughts. Even Jerry wouldn't approve of her solitary trips to the outcrop—especially if he knew that she used his heavy hooded coat as protection against the male hawk's dive-bombing attacks. And if anyone should be sympathetic to her case, it was Jerry. He was the scruffy old man she met six months earlier, in this same woodland. When she met him, the leaves were colorful but dying; now they were fresh from the tight buds of spring. No less spectacular had been Jerry's transformation in her life: from a rumored lunatic known by locals as the "Chicken Man" to an adopted family member. Even her mother had taken to him so quickly that now Jerry boarded in their home—with his pet chicken Becky and homing pigeon Patty—helping with the family business, a one-room country grocery.

Something in the distance passed through her peripheral vision. Instinct told her to drop from view, but Sammy charged toward the intruder, freezing him in his steps. With no choice, she trotted after the sheepdog.

"He won't bite," she yelled, voice carrying the distance. Then recognizing the figure, she faltered. Only a hundred feet

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separated her from Billy, until recently her constant enemy. Dealing with the 14-year-old had become confusing since forming a truce with him, one thrust upon them by Victor. Two weeks earlier, while visiting the outcrop with her, Victor had been attacked by Hakanyi. Stuck high up a tree, Claire couldn't help her only friend crouching helplessly beneath the hawk's diving assaults. Then, miraculously, Billy had darted onto the outcrop, pulling Victor to safety.

Billy didn't explain how he came to be there and Victor didn't ask. He only insisted that she and Billy put an end to their animosity. And for a few short hours, they did. Claire forgot her resentment of the school bully who regularly taunted her, and Billy forgot his extreme jealousy of the strangely pale girl with the boyishly short, white hair who sought to take his place in Victor's life.

But their truce couldn't last.

Sammy jumped up at the tall, wiry teen, greeting him like a long-lost friend. Billy wore baggy, ripped cut-offs and a faded black tee shirt, crudely altered with a pair of scissors to be sleeveless.

"Get your dog off me," he said, in his typically surly way.

"Rub his head a bit," she countered. "That's all he wants."

Billy dropped a hand awkwardly onto Sammy's head and then yanked it away.

"That's enough, Sammy," Claire said, pulling the huge sheepdog by the collar as the boy moved beyond reach of his straining paws. "What'cha doing?" She snatched a glance at

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his long, big-featured face before looking away. As always, Billy concealed his glass eye behind a pad of oily brown hair, which he consistently stroked to keep in place.

“What business of it is yours?” he said, lip curling beneath a long nose.

“Be that way!” Claire turned abruptly but Sammy again bounded toward the boy. And again she wrestled to pull him away. “I hope you’re not heading to the outcrop,” she said, no longer avoiding his face. “Because that male hawk *will* attack you.” In truth, she wasn’t concerned about what Hakanyi might do to him but what he might do to the hawks. A known delinquent, Billy had once tried and failed to shoot Ku-Khain. Moreover, his father, a fugitive from law, had obsessively stalked the legendary raptor intending to stuff her as a trophy.

Claire noted a full backpack slung over one of his shoulders. At least he wasn’t toting a rifle or shotgun. “What do you have in that backpack?”

Already turning away, Billy glanced back. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“I know what you’re up to,” she said defiantly, having not the least idea. But when Billy reacted with open-mouthed astonishment, she trumpeted, “I knew it! You ARE up to no good.” Oafish features contracting in relief, he said, “You don’t know squat,” and turned to stomp through the underbrush, following no particular trail. Straining to hold Sammy back, Claire watched the boy recede into the woods, heading who knows where.