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The Greentwins

Two newborn hares dreamed against their mother's belly in a nest of grass. The spring moon was bright as milk above them. The mother hare dozed lightly, one ear cocked for danger, rousing now and then to groom her small, sleeping children with a rough tongue. Near dawn, she heard a blue jay loudly declare news of a coyote sneaking across the meadow. Sitting up to sniff, she caught the unmistakable scent of him on the breeze – the damp, rank coat; the sourness of his breath; a hint of blood. She strained to hear which direction the coyote was coming from and made out the faint hush of his paws through the grass to her left. Her great ears, fully alert now, trembled.

Her little ones slept on: two curls of pale gold, four soft white ears. But she could hear the coyote's panting breath. Fear shot through her body in a hot streak. She leaped sideways from the nest with all the force in her. The coyote, startled, stepped back a few paces. The mother hare zigzagged in mad, desperate arcs across the meadow, doing all she could to distract him from her sleeping babies. The coyote tore after her. It was early spring, the grass short and green. The hare had little cover, and though she ran fast, darting on strong legs, she stumbled once at the mouth of a badger hole. One stumble was all it took. The coyote was upon her.

The meadow fell silent.

A while later the coyote moved on, leaving only three splashes of the mother hare's blood behind in the dawn light.

The twin hares woke as the sun was breaking over the ridge. They turned sleepily to drink from their mother, but found a great cold spot where she had been. The sky over them and the ground under them felt suddenly very large and very empty. The brother twin began

to shake. His sister made a small noise of comfort, her best imitation of their mother, and burrowed closer to him. Mother would be back. She always came back. Whenever she went off to graze, she told them never to move. *No matter what,* she said, *remain silent and still.* So they waited, and dozed to sleep again.

When the little leverets woke next, a warm hand was scooping them up from their nest of grass. At first, the sister thought to bite the hairless thing that grabbed them, but the hand smelled of grass seeds and milk. From above, a voice hummed in familiar tones – wind through firs, mother's breathing. The tones sounded like the hare-words for *Be still, little hearts. Be at ease.* And so the twin leverets, drifting into dreams again, let themselves be carried away from the meadow of their birth, across a rushing spring creek, to a green-painted wagon in a patch of alder trees. Two glass windows tinted a reddish-rose gave the wagon the appearance of a creature with eyes. Smoke coiled from a silver chimney pipe. Four elk, unhitched from their harnesses, grazed on hedgenettle in the shade.

The leverets woke a third time feeling famished, and found themselves in a nest of grasses and hare fur in an old rusted tin by a woodstove fire. A man and a woman sat side by side in front of the hearth. They looked almost identical, the male and female versions of the same broad-cheeked face, the same short-cropped fringe of fir-green hair, the same dark skin and pale, round eyes. They were called Angelica and Gabriel, and long ago they had been named the Witchtwin Doctors of the Land by the Wild Folk. But among the Country people, to whom they were little more than a legend, they were known simply as the Greentwins. Just now, they were feeding sticks into the flames with the hand they shared between them.

Being only infant hares, and therefore never actually having seen a human before, the leverets found this conjoined hand no more alarming than the green wagon itself or the fire held in the iron box; the ancient jars of herbs macerating in dark wine on low shelves; the piles of skins and rush-woven sleeping mats in a corner; the speckled old enamel pots and

pans by the woodstove; the great basket of acorns by the door. All of this was an entirely new landscape of shapes and smells and colours. The leverets sat up, their little pale ears quivering, blinking their golden eyes and sniffing the air carefully, as they had seen their mother do.

Immediately the shared hand was near them again, this time offering a scrap of cloth that dripped with milk. They drank greedily.

"Welcome to the house of the Greentwins, small leverets," a voice murmured in words that they could understand. "Do not be afraid. We have been waiting for you."

All through the spring, summer and autumn, the Greentwins raised the two leverets like their own children, letting them sleep by the fire or out in the shelter of the manzanita bushes as they chose. They spoke to them in the languages of both humans and hares, and gave them human names. The sister they called Myrtle, after the silver-green bush that grew on ridgetops, and the brother Mallow, after the sweet weed that grew all along old roadsides.

Those months were gentle, full of succulent chickweed breakfasts in wet meadows and long evenings by the fire. There, Gabriel and Angelica told the leverets many human stories. They told the ancient creation myths of Farallone, about the Spider-woman who spun the dust from fallen stars down to earth, about the Elk who mixed that stargold with dark and milk and made all the animals, plants, waters and stones; about the many thousands of years of peace among human, plant, animal and sky; about the coming of the Star-Priests and the making of the City of New Albion, and their hunger for the energy they had figured out how to extract from pieces of stargold mined from rivers and hills and streams; about the time of the Collapse, when the City overreached itself and everything fell apart, when disease swept Farallone and the Star-Priests of the City built a giant wall to protect themselves; about the birth of the Wild Folk to heal the ravages done to Farallone by the hungry City, and the laws

that presently kept the life of the island in a tenuous balance. They did not tell the leverets what they feared – that the Breaking was not over. That by building walls of fear and hurt between City, Country, and the territories of the Wild Folk, Farallone had become only more fractured, more wounded, and therefore more endangered than ever before.

Hares normally do not need stories to understand the world, for they live in the thick of each moment, ripe as new grass. But the Greentwins had chosen these hares for a purpose; for nobody is as good as a hare at getting over, under, round or through a wall. But for this they needed to understand the world in a human way. Stories helped them to see things in a human way, because it was through stories that humans understood their own world.

One evening in winter, a herd of thunderclouds came to sit above the ocean on the eastern horizon. The Greentwins and the leverets were camped on the Country's eastern-most ridge, the one that looked down over the Great Salvian Desert to the walled City of New Albion. Even two hundred years after the Breaking, the valley remained a desert. Only sagebrush grew there. No one ever crossed it. Even the hardy deer avoided it, and most of the lizards. The thunderclouds cast a black shadow over the distant silhouette of the City, where it sprawled across the far eastern peninsula. The long metal wall that surrounded it, sealing it off from the Country, gleamed ominously under the gathering darkness. Its rim of florescent lanterns flickered, illuminating one of the Star-Breakers. There were five in total along the City's Wall, great, round metal towers crowned with six points. Each contained a reactor that could break the molecules of a flake of stargold into pure power, the power that the City had run on for many centuries before the Collapse. Now, the last beam of the setting sun split amber along the crowned top of one of the towers, its rays wheeling like the threads of a web.

Gabriel and Angelica looked at one another over the basket of acorns they were shelling under the sunset. They glanced at Myrtle and Mallow, who were grazing on fresh miner's lettuce at the edge of the wood, chattering to one another between mouthfuls. The

two leverets were leggy, exuberant adolescents now, with strong muscled haunches and enormous ears with inner skin so thin that the setting sun shone through it, illuminating many small veins.

After a long silence, Angelica pursed her lips into an O. With quiet hoots she called down two barn owls from the winter sky. They landed, claws clattering, on the roof of the wagon.

It was time.