

## First Meeting

As the sun descended past the horizon, a thick mist billowed into the valley. Flowing like a river of clouds it drifted along the wooded hillsides, weaving in between the trees and swamping the valley floor. The entire area was cloaked in dark until the half crescent moon began to creep across the sky, filling the fog with an eerie glow that the locals called spirit light.

The house was a few miles outside of the town, hidden at the end of curved dirt road, they had electricity and phone lines, but the nearest neighbor was a mile away. Wooded area in every direction, they lived as far as one could from modern life.

The only light burning in the small one story ranch house was in the family room, where two people sat reading different books close together on the couch. Light classical music streamed from the cassette player on the far wall. Down a short hallway and through a old wooden oak door a child about 9 years old lay under his covers. He was listening for the sound of footfall which would be his parents going to sleep. It was hardly past 7 o'clock and he wasn't even the slightest bit tired. He twitched excited about going outside after dark and playing in the woods, especially tonight, he had never gone out in the spirit light before. He had heard the local tales of strange creatures roaming in the woods on these nights, but they were just that, old tales. He was going out to explore, his parents were trying to hide something from him, and he knew it.

It was another hour or so before they went to sleep, he had almost nodded off waiting in the warm embrace of his comforter in the cool dark of his room. Now the entire house was dark, silently he slipped from his bed and crosses the floor. Climbing out through the opened window he slipped onto the cool wet grass. Almost slipping, he then set off across the yard towards the edge of the woods.

For a year or so now, he had been exploring the woods around his house in the day, but now everything was different, the shadows seemed to leap around and dance through the dimly lit fog, everything was visible yet nothing seemed entirely solid.

He began weaving his way between the towering trees, each one a spire in a great organic cathedral of nature. The woods were far from silent, insects chattering small creatures scampering through the underbrush and leaf litter, the sounds distended and far away in the ever flowing river of fog. The wet and cool leaf litter crunching under his soft footfall. The wind blew softly through the leaves in the trees, a soft ruffling like a natural symphony. In undertones floating through the breeze were softly sung notes, a lilting melody barely audible as it meandered through the woods. The notes seemed to emanate from every direction at once, surrounding him in a shroud of sound, filtering out the rest of the sounds until only the song is left.

Although there was nothing he could see, the sound seemed to be forming a tunnel around him, leading him on a trail moving deeper and deeper into the woods, passing between trees and along small stream beds. Finally it ended in a small clearing in the woods. He emerged from the tree line and stepped into the opening. Looking into the sky he could see a clear view of the waxing moon, like a curved smile in the dark blue sky. The fog began to thin as he watched the moon, and disappeared completely from the opening. It still hung heavily in between the trees, obscuring everything, making it look the same, and removing the trail that seemed to exist only moment before.

In the ambiguous boundaries of the forest edge indistinct shadows began to coalesce into solid shapes, one becoming clearer quicker than the others, finally reaching a solid form. A young mountain lion stalked between the trees, moving silently towards the clearing in which the boy stood, entranced by the early spring moon. Creeping past the edge of the woods and into the short grass it stepped carefully watching the boy, watching for something, anything that might mean danger. As it approached closer and closer, the boy finally took notice. He slipped on the dewy grass and landed sitting as the cat slid forward standing about five feet away from the increasingly frightened boy. The boy tried to cry out but found his voice trapped deep within. The cat took a step forward its golden slit eyes staring directly into his eyes. The boy stared back, his body beginning to shiver. He managed to speak, forcing the words from his throat.

"P-please don't eat me, go away!" He cried out, almost inaudibly. The cat gave a quick breath out, almost like a laugh, then taking another step closer to the boy, almost grinning. The moonlight reflected off its soft coat, giving the creature a numinous glow. It's piercing eyes reaching deep inside the boy, probing softly within while the boy cowered unsure of what he should be trying to do. The cat sniffed the air and sat upon its rump looking over the boys face once more.

The boy sniffled softly as he stared into the great golden eyes, choking back a sob he stared back defiantly now. Thin streamers of moonlight began to swim along the cat's body, as they disappeared back into the night, the edges of it began to blur. Changing and moving like something right at the edge of your vision. The cat's body submerging into the shadows as it writhed and twisted slowly becoming more and more like the child himself. Seconds later, after what had seemed like hours another child about his age stared at him from where the cat had since stood, the eyes where that same predatory gold shimmering in the fog light, but her face was angelic and friendly.

"Play?" The cat asked softly towards the boy, seeming unsure of the words she had spoken. Her eyes blinked softly as she stared at him.

"Wh-what?" he asked his voice almost as high as hers as his mind spun, trying to take it all in.

“Play...with me?” She asked forming the other two words slowly and awkwardly. He just stared at her and then he nodded his head, unsure of what to really do, but how could this girl be dangerous. She grinned suddenly, he expected to see the razor sharp teeth of the wild cat, but only her nice little smile shone in the light. She reached over, offering her hand. He took it and she pulled him up, a little question wavering in her eyes, before she tapped his arm and said, “tag,” then she took off running through the clearing. He laughed softly then took off after her forgetting the questions in his mind. As they both leapt and danced through the foggy clearing trading off tags until the both fell exhausted against a tree on the edge, giggling happily.

Looking into her eyes, he could still see the predatory look of the cat but it was almost hidden behind the innocence of this little girl. She noticed his glance and turned giving him a quick kiss on the cheek before standing up. He immediately tried to wipe away the kiss, as to not catch cooties. Then she smiled softly.

“My time here tonight is almost over.” She sniffed a little, a tear forming corner of her eye.

“I’m not sure the next time I’ll be able to play again.” The tear fell slowly down her cheek.

“Ca-can’t you just stay like this?” He asked her, and she shook her head a soft no.

“Promise me that the next time the fog rolls around you’ll visit me again? She asked a soft smile on her face as another few tears dripped down her cheek.

“Ye-yes I wil.” He said standing up, looking into her face as she smiled again, titling her head, and whispering “goodbye.” Once again the shadows seemed to blur around her, as the human form was dragged slowly back into the fog, leaving only the boy and the cat standing in the field. Seconds later it fled into the dark, the sun peeking over the horizon. The fog sparkling like a million diamonds for a few seconds before it evaporated into the cool morning air. Leaving the boy alone in the morning chill, but warmed with thoughts of his new friend.