

Becoming DeerPreface to *Dancing at Deer Rock*

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Cradling British or Russian arms, iron-tipped spears and twenty-inch daggers secured by scabbard and buckler, men of the Chilkoot stay their posts against their Chilkat cousins on the meadow isthmus of Deishu. Musket-fire has all but ceased on this fourth morning of battle; the prickle of high alert is replaced by anticipation of normalcy. Headmen of each faction emerge from a small house owned by neither. They still wear the whalebone shoulder-pieces and bearhide mantles of war, decked by prominent cedar hats carved into killer whale and sea monster. Draped over the right shoulder of each, though, is a Chilkat blanket, emblem of peace. “Enough bloodshed,” booms Chief Danawak’s voice against the walls of ancient spruce that define the meadows’ edges. “Three men dead on each side. The debt is repaid.”

Ranks break and fade into the woods as warriors rush off to large cedar canoes that will take them to Deer Rock. An hours’ paddle north to the head of Lutak Inlet brings men of two watersheds to the intertidal estuary of the Chilkoot River and, with this high tide, upriver to the rock. Early conflicts were waged a week ago at the river mouth; then nine miles south at Deishu, on the northern base of the Chilkat Peninsula before it forks the Lynn Canal into Chilkat and Chilkoot Inlets, half-way between two river territories.

The eulachon run on the Chilkoot was strong this spring, while the Chilkat produced only moderate numbers of the smelt whose oil is prized throughout the region. L’koot villagers also secured exceptional stocks of sockeye salmon, dried and smoked last autumn in such quantities that winter sheds are still more than half-full into spring. Chilkats, whose three villages are accustomed to plenty, ache from a lean season on their river, named “salmon storehouse” for its usual abundance, and are angered by their relatives’ unwillingness to share.

Resentment ignites at a forty-day party, a traditional event in which clans unite to commemorate the life of one recently deceased, usually demonstrated by substantial gift-giving. Relatives are outraged when a L'koot man refuses his Chilkat cousin's request for a pack-load of eulachon. Harsh words are exchanged. The cousins grapple, then one stabs the other in the face, a heinous offense among Tlingits. Two days later, a band of Chilkats ambushes a Chilkoot man fishing at the mouth of his clan's river, but he escapes before they cut his face, too. Following the dictates of tradition, internecine war breaks out to achieve a balance of honor. And, as is custom, peace is reached at Deer Rock.

Men dressed in fine regalia beach their canoes on separate sides of the rock; the two groups gather a few hundred feet apart on the sedge-and-iris shores in the riverine avenue hemmed by giant Sitka spruce. Some men hold thick white shocks of bald eagle feathers. After each assembly exchanges messages carried by young runners, drums begin to throb somber rhythms and, one by one, dancers step forward. Choral voices rise like the fluffy eagle down flung from seal gut sacks and lifted above the river by invisible currents. Dance movements grow jerky as the drums become more assertive. A low murmur issues from the passing of water in clear blue-green channels between bear-sized boulders along this lower stretch. Drums thunder, then boom to a sudden halt. Dancers freeze. River-noise rushes in to fill the void.

Dancers gradually retreat to their comrades, leaving two men to face each other from either side of the rock. From their respective groups advance the headmen. Each costumes his dancer with a deerhide cape and an antlered headpiece. Warriors are transformed to Deer; the jerky, exaggerated motion of the initial dance is replaced with elaborate circles of studied movement. Drumbeat is muffled, voices low. Peace is in the making. As eagle down wafts among them like the fat, lazy snowflakes of spring, troops sit wrapped in Chilkat blankets, some resting their temples on bent knees, contemplative. Drums are silent, movements of the deer are furtive—first one stalks the other around the rock, then roles are reversed. No sound intrudes but the whispering river, always the river. Drums and chants resound when the deer eventually embrace on the grassy flank between rock and rushing water.

At the conclusion, Chilkats are invited to feast in L'koot clan houses. That night, they gather around a firepit to listen and respond to former enemies who stand forth with salutatory speeches on the virtues of the opposition. As the right hand is used to brandish weapons, tonight the men will show peaceful intentions by eating with their left.