

TWELVE

It was burgers and dogs again. Steve had small burger patties cooked rare for the two skunks with some salt and pepper only. Hot dogs were off the menu for the skunks, being highly processed and possibly with garlic and onions in the undisclosed ‘spices’ mix in the ingredients. He and Max had both burgers and dogs, but skipped the onions though Cathy insisted it was alright as it wasn’t she and Jake who’d be eating them if they were present. There was more fresh corn for the skunks and the last of the blueberries for dessert.

As they finished dinner, Steve pulled out a small bag of dried, off-white leaves. If it had been marijuana, there would have been enough to roll one small joint.

“I found a place 20 minutes away with the sage, Jake. As asked, I only purchased a small amount. It’s loose leaf. You still believe it’s a Native American spirit in that board?”

“A small bundle would have worked better, but it’ll have to do. Thanks. As to what is in the board, we’ll find out, won’t we? Please, bring me a small steel pot from the kitchen which has a fitting lid. Dad, may I borrow your lighter,” Jake paused and sighed. “Forget that. I don’t have real thumbs.”

“I can light it for you, Jake,” Max reassured his skunk son.

“In the breaker box, disable number seven, please,” Cathy instructed. “That’s the hard-wired smoke detector.”

Steve opened the breaker box door and flipped the switch on his way back from the kitchen. He set a small cooking pot on the table in front of Jake. Using both forepaws, Jake upended the sage into the pot. Max lit it and it began to smolder. Jake struggled to fold up a small piece of paper into a fan he could grasp with both forepaws. Soon, heavy white smoke wafted up from the pot. The scent of sage filled the room.

“Now what?” Max asked.

“I do my best to smudge the area around the board, all of you, and lastly myself. Dad, if you would be so kind as to move the pot around for me as I move about.”

Max did as he was asked trying to keep from laughing at the absurdity of watching a skunk sit-up, wave the make-shift fan over the pot and over the board, move over and do it again until he had worked all the way around the board. Then Jake shuffled the fan to move smoke up into his face before repeating it again at Steve. Cathy moved up next to the pot so Jake could wave smoke at her. She coughed a little bit. Finally, he fanned smoke at himself and coughed a little himself.

“Cover the pot, please.”

Steve put a cover on the pot which would eventually smother the smoldering sage leaves, though they had nearly burned out on their own already.

Jake put a forepaw on the board. Cathy did likewise. Jake closed his eyes, did his best to blank his mind and then as much in his mind as he whispered it aloud, he called out. "Are you the spirit, Say-goo-kahw?"

You may call me that.

Cathy's eyes shot wide. The voice was clear in her head. In the past, in communicating with the board, it was more an impression than a clear voice.

Jake sighed. "Why couldn't I hear you before?"

I have been trying but your mind has been too closed. It takes the sage a moment to clear the poison blocking your mind from hearing me.

"I heard you that time."

Good. Cathy, please pull back. I need to talk to this one alone.

Cathy did as she was told. The two humans were watching closely as Jake kept his eyes closed with one paw on the board. He seemed to twitch from time to time with his muzzle opening and closing.

"Don't disturb him," Cathy warned the others.

"What's happening," Max asked.

"Apparently, Jake was correct on his guess. The board channels Say-goo-kahw, the Abenaki skunk spirit, or something willing to be called by that name. They're in deep conversation."

The two humans and skunk watched the other skunk sit there twitching from time to time for a good twenty minutes. Finally, his eyes opened and he pulled his paw off the board. He blinked them a few times before looking at the others in the room.

"Set up the board and retrieve my board from the other room as we'll need it also. Segôkw agreed to not be offended by its use in this case. We must play four player cribbage."

"Wait, before you said its name was Say-goo-kahw," Steve replied.

"Which was still not pronouncing his name quite right. I had to go back and forth with him resaying it several times. It's close, but Segôkw is the correct way."

“Will you discuss what you talked about other than the correct way to pronounce Say-goo-kahw’s name?” Cathy asked.

Jake shook his head negatively. “I can’t go into details. And you were very close in your pronunciation, Cathy. We can practice later. Let’s just say that Segôkw and I have come to an agreement or sorts. This is part of it.”

Max retrieved and set up the second board.

“Humans are on my board. Cathy and I are on Segôkw’s.”

They played. Steve won with Max close behind him. Cathy and Jake were double skunked.

“Again, please,” Jake asked

The results were similar the second time but with Steve and Max trading places. Cathy was skunked and Jake was double skunked again.

“Again, please,” Jake asked yet again.

“What are you doing, Jake?” Steve asked. “You just added twelve hours to your time as a feral skunk.”

“No, I haven’t. Remember, Segôkw’s original punishment to me is I am to remain a skunk until I agree to leave, never to return. I can now lose all day and badly and it won’t affect that. Please set the board up again. This time we trade off. Cathy and me on my board and you two on Segôkw’s.”

This time Cathy won soundly, skunking both Max and Steve. Again, Jake was double-skunked. Max and Steve watched each other and nothing happened. Even Cathy stared in surprise.

“I don’t get it,” Cathy exclaimed. “Shouldn’t the two of you be anthro skunks now?”

“Segôkw likes them as he likes you, Cathy. Remember what he told you earlier this week? They may remain skunks if they had chosen. It also means that they may become skunks on their own anytime they like for the rest of the week. So, the board rules no longer affect them.”

All three stared at Jake. Max thought for a moment and began to sprout a bushy striped tail. He stopped the process and reversed it back.

“Interesting,” he quipped.

“I was able to renegotiate my, um, punishment, partially ‘cause I’ve refused to leave quickly as he had expected I would do. Playing three games was the first part of the deal I struck with Segôkw,” Jake replied. “I needed to play three games in a row fairly regardless of the outcome. I guess he wanted to test my sincerity in regard to the rest of the negotiation.”

“So, what else can you tell us now?” Steve asked.

“Very little,” Jake replied. He turned to Cathy. “What has been your biggest frustration since becoming a skunk?”

Cathy was caught off guard for a moment and thought about it. “Having to ask people to play a game and get skunked so we can talk directly because I don’t have human-style vocal cords.”

Cathy suddenly reached for her throat in surprise as she felt something change. The two humans stared at the skunk as they were startled by her reaction. Jake did not react.

“Are you alright?” Max asked.

Cathy nodded and replied, “Yes.” She squeaked in a high-pitched voice. Not cartoon chipmunk-level, but still higher pitched than an adult human. It was more like a young child’s voice. She stared at them in surprise and felt at her throat a bit more with her forepaws.

“I swear that was English and not skunk-squeak,” Steve replied.

“My turn to call out ‘surprise’,” Jake squeak in reply.

Cathy stared at him. “How?” she asked in English.

Jake shrugged his shoulders like a human. “In my conversation with Segôkw I asked why he did as he had to you when you chose to become a skunk. He said he would have allowed you to keep the vocal cords if you had simply asked back when you asked to become a skunk full-time.”

Cathy shook her head. “I asked to keep my opposable thumbs but I was afraid I was pushing things to far as it was with that.”

“As I said, Segôkw likes you. He agreed to my request if I played three games in a row fairly regardless of the outcome. And you, in turn, asked without me directly telling you what to ask for.”

Cathy moved over to him and hugged him tightly, nuzzling him briefly on the back of the neck. “Thank you,” she chirred in skunk.

He nuzzled her back. “You’ve been a good teacher and host. I felt I needed to do something for you in return.” He turned to his family. “Thank you for your help this evening. Cathy and I will head out for the night. We’ll peak in at sunrise. Can you spare a piece of bread end about the size of my forepaw?”

“Bread’s not good for skunks per my conversation with Dr. Vachon,” Steve replied.

“I have no plans to eat it though I’ll need to nibble on it to carry it. Last night Cathy taught me some hunting techniques. Vole isn’t too bad to these skunk tastebuds. It is fishing camp, right? I haven’t been able to get any fishing in since Monday. Tonight, I’d like to try my paw at some fishing in this form. The bread will be my bait. If I get lucky, then Cathy’s and my midnight lunch will be ‘sushi’.”