“THE KEEPERS OF THE DAWN”

Excerpt from The Spring Story in *The Seasonal Stories*, Book 1 of Arc IV of *Glengarry Tales*
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The eldest of the beavers, a wise and dignified figure, climbed to the top of the Lodge House and called the meeting to order: “Ahem!” he shouted, “You know me! But for the younglings, I am Clement, head of the Great Lodge! Welcome, beaver brethren, muskrat cousins, and fellow swamp folk! The ice is retreating and winter is well and truly through! We greet the spring with the birds, frogs, turtles, fish, and flies!”

“And the squirrels!” yelled Sourbrush.

“And the squirrels! Indeed, our story today is about the most famous of squirrels, Minnifair.”

At this all the squirrels – red, black, and grey – erupted. They whooped, hopped over each other, yanked on the branches, and chattered: *Minnifair! Minnifair!*

Clement smiled at them, then continued: “But first, we need to remember why we meet here each spring. We beavers are the builders of the marsh! Our dams change the watercourses, but we only work with what the water allows as Father Sun comes and goes. We know how and when the water will flow, freeze, and expand. But the water also speaks to us of the dreams of trees, bullrushes, and cattails. It tells us of those who sleep in the mud. It watches as the summer birds depart and it waits for them to return. We all experience the cold season differently. To survive, we must learn the marshland’s whole story in the time of warmth and light. This is why

we come together to share our knowledge as Father Sun grows strong again. Let us hear first from my dear mate – Trillium – mother of the Lodge!"

Trillium waddled up on top of the Lodge's roof next to her husband. Her dark eyes twinkled as she peered at the rosy dawn horizon: "Dear Friends!" she called, "Today, we talk of Father Sun. Why does he grow distant in autumn? Why does he return to end the icy darkness? We have to say thank you to him first, because we have survived."

The assembly pondered this and murmured, chattered, and chirped in low tones, *Thank you, Father Sun, for coming back to us*. Some of the birds cocked their heads sideways and eyed the sun. He climbed higher, while the soft, grey-blue clouds parted in greeting. Trillium followed the birds' gaze. Clement saw his mate's shoulders slump a bit. It was such a relief to have made it to spring – the terrible test of the winter was over.

Trillium continued, "At first, we disagreed about why Father Sun leaves us. Some creatures sleep through the frosts. Others follow the sun to other lands. Yet others, like we beavers, work through the winter. Those who take the long sleep believe that Father Sun dies when the land freezes. They think that when they dream of him, they bring him back to life."

The Painted Turtles, Clem and Tala, stirred from their spots next to Morris. Tala cleared her throat and called, "Hullo, Swamp Neighbours! Yes, that's us! We sleep at the bottom of the pond through winter. We thought that Father Sun falls into the depths and rises with us."

Trillium nodded, "Yes. It took us time to understand what he was doing. And it was only because we met and talked with others that it became clear. We who stay awake through the winter know that Father Sun does not go away completely. He does not fall asleep and he does not die. He gets weaker, as we do when we are sick or injured. But if he was merely hurt or ill,

this would not happen, over and over. This is why we say that he journeys away from us and migrates back, alongside the summer birds."

Cressida the Heron shook her crown of feathers of midnight blue, then squawked, "Yes! We herons say this is so. When Father Sun shortens the days here, he leads us to warmer grounds."

Trillium squinted at the assembly, "There were those who left – those who slept – and those who stayed here, awake during the snows. Three groups! Each group had a different experience. No one could agree about what happened in wintertime. Then we beavers realized that we must build knowledge, just as we build our dams and dens. Unless we brought all three groups together, we would only ever know part of Father Sun's story."

The ethereal light of early morning waxed brighter, as though Father Sun was listening.

Clement smiled at the young beavers and muskrats who had gathered near his feet, "After a lot of talk, we agreed that Father Sun might visit the dreams of those who sleep through the winter, even as he takes his main strength away to other lands. But he always comes back. We shared this story across our network of dams, from colony to colony. In time, everyone called the Beavers, the 'Keepers of Spring's Dawn,' because we were the ones who pieced together the truth. It became our duty to explain Father Sun's travels. We each know how to survive the winter in our own ways. But we marsh folk learned to come together after the frosts. This is why the spring is a time of many ways."

Clement paced back and forth in thought, his bulk wobbling. A cloud floated across the sun and he watched its shadow pass over the water. He stood up on his hind paws and declared, "We realized that this was not just about Father Sun. It was about us. We are divided, kind by

kind. And we know the stories of our own kinds. That is what winter is for: in winter, we survive by relying on our own peoples, whether that is found inside the den or the nest, on the wing, or at the bottom of the pond. Each group of animals and birds has their own truths."

"But in spring, we must know more. We have to find out what others experience and reach a common understanding. We discovered that we were each part of a greater story that is larger than any single people of the marsh. And, harum, heh," he paused with a moment almost wistfully, "we know that this is Father Sun's larger story, which even the humans must follow."

Morris's heart swelled. There was a larger story. This was what he had felt while weaving and building. All muskrats swam. But there was something more than just learning to swim. He had to learn how to sail!

He looked around at everyone. They were listening closely. The frog queen Breelia sat perfectly still; her dappled body shone gold and green in the rosy light. Her people clustered around her, frozen in silence, their tiny padded toes spread on the bound branches of the platform.

Morris thought about what it must be like to be a frog, when they sang so loudly on spring nights that their songs were heard as far as the humans' town.

Clement continued. "That is what today's story is about, the story of Minnifair the Squirrel," Clement announced. "Minnifair taught us to learn Father Sun's story."