

Healer

By: Josepha Sherman

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“Do these stories have to have a female protagonist?” I can’t tell you how many times I was asked that question. It’s every bit as much a stereotype as the ones surrounding fantasy, science fiction, or the men and women who write it.

Archaeologist, folklorist, and novelist Josepha Sherman didn’t bother with that question, being busy with other, more pressing ones.

In this story of courage and initiation, Josepha moves out of the area of Russian folklore, in which she has made a name for herself, and into the realm of shamans whom she asks: Is there life beyond power? Dr. Faustus said no, and traded life and soul for a dream of magic.

In this story, the author offers her healer Faustus’s choice: the power of love, or the love of power. Who says a man can’t choose right? Not Josepha Sherman.

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The night had been wet and chill with the promise of winter, and as Osheoan crept through the narrow entrance of his small, solitary lodge, body still and mind weary from a broken, troubled sleep, the morning air was still dank enough to make him shiver and grab his fur robe about himself. As he moved, the little Power signs of shell and bone and metal woven into it jangled shrilly together. At the high, thin sound, folk turned briefly to look at him, tensing or smiling or nodding politely according to their natures. Osheoan, Spirit-Speaker of this, the Wind Bird Clan, drew himself up to his full lean height in slightly self-conscious pride.

Ohe, yes, the people still did show him the respect due one who spoke with spirits. Even if he had produced no miracles in these many years, nothing more than the small marvels of healing torn flesh or broken bones.

Not, thought Osheoan wryly, that there was anything wrong in minor healings: seeing young Ashewan walking without a limp on the leg he had splinted or plump Esewa cuddling her latest baby, cured of the nagging cough that had threatened to drain the flesh from her. When Osheoan, then little more than a boy, had first been struck by Power, his initial feeling—aside from sheer terror at being set aside from the norm—had been delight that now he could do something to help those in pain.

Pride had come later.

Osheoan put aside thoughts of his troubled sleep (no messages there, no hidden dream-warnings), and made his circuit of the lodges, pleased to find no injuries, no illness. Hunters returning to the lodges, luck charms jingling from robes and braided hair, antelope or strings of hares borne on their backs, paused beneath

their burdens to dip their heads in courtesy. Women weaving the tribal blankets or gathering herbs and roots, black hair and copper ornaments glinting in the sun, took a moment to touch hand to heart when he passed, a tall, quiet shadow in Spirit-Speaker's gray. And Osheoan admitted, deep within himself, that the respect shown him was sweet, still sweet.

Sweetness with a faintly bitter undertaste: secret shame, secret sorrow.

No one saw Osheoan's sudden flinch, no one saw him clench his teeth against unwelcome memories. Had the Power ever been real? Once, surely, he'd been that young, earnest boy, once he'd been believing. Once he had walked with spirits (ah, or had those been nothing more than waking dreams, forced on a boy dizzy from smoke and dazed by drums?), learned the true, deep way of healing. The way now closed to him.

Once, too, he had loved: Seshawa. Gentle Seshawa with a wit like the sharpness of berry-tang beneath honey. Seshawa of the laughing eyes and heart: she, his wife, his own.

Seshawa, who had died in birthing, for all her husband's Power, leaving a son, Mikasha, and an empty, bitter man.

Osheoan gave a silent, humorless laugh. Being Spirit-Speaker was still sweet, yes. And so he still went through the trappings of Power, the rituals that kept the others of the clan in awe of him. He still healed. But no one save he knew no spirits were roused by those rituals, that the healing was of simple herbs and time, nothing more. Fortunate, fortunate, that the Wind Bird Clan was a healthy one, that there had been no devastating illnesses or wounds, nothing to deeply harm them and destroy him. The day would come, though; the thought of it lingered, quivering, just at the back of his mind. Someday disaster would— must—strike, and he, the so-mighty Spirit-Speaker, would try, and fail, and be revealed as false.

Osheoan stirred, impatient with himself. Yes, the Power had spilled away from him with Seshawa's death (if, indeed, he'd ever truly borne it) and with it, belief in the gods. But life continued, the here, the now, the real.

The loneliness—

No. Enough self-pity.

Osheoan knew he'd hidden his loss of Power well. No one suspected, not even his son. Least of all his son, handsome Mikasha, with his father's height and mother's laughing eyes. Osheoan winced, remembering the boy who had been, face still pudgy with childishness but ablaze with near-adult eagerness, staring fiercely up at him, asking, "*Why won't you teach me? I'm your son, your blood. Why can't I be your apprentice?*"

How could he answer that fierceness? *Because I'm a sham. A liar, with*

nothing to teach you. No, no, he had never said that, he had forced the blame onto Mikasha instead, putting the boy off with stories, telling him at first, year after year, “*Later. You are still too young.*” Then, when at last Mikasha was old enough to know his father lied, Osheoan had heard himself speak the cruelest lie of all: “*I cannot teach you. It would be too dangerous, impossible. I’m afraid you have no gift for Power at all.*”

And in lying to his son, he’d lied to himself as well, insisting, *The boy will forget what he cannot have. He will make himself some bright new life as warrior or wise man. He has no need of Power.*

Osheoan stared bleakly out past the circle of lodges, blindly out to the vast, cold plains. How could it have come to this? He had never thought himself a coward, had undergone the rites of manhood and the harsher, grimmer rituals of Power—scarring mind instead of merely body—without a qualm. He had risked the very essence that was Osheoan without hesitation. Yet, when a handful of words would have put Mi-kasha’s mind at ease—Mikasha, his son!—fear had shaken his heart, stopped his tongue. Fear of losing the last trace of what he’d been, the pride, the awe if not the reality of Power.

He’d kept silent. And by that silence, Osheoan knew he had taught his son all too well: bitterness at what the boy could only think his own fault, his own inner shortcomings. He had taught Mikasha unhappiness.

And in the end, he had driven his son away. Once the boy had become adult, passing the rituals of manhood without a word to his father, Mikasha had quietly abandoned his home, his clan, setting out to hunt for his own purpose in being.

A sudden chill gust of wind swept wet off the plains, and Osheoan shivered. “Mikasha,” he murmured, aching. “Oh, my son...”

His dreams had been about the boy, full of trouble, of pain...

But dreams held no secret messages, not for him, not anymore.

Osheoan started, jarred out of his inner darkness by shouting. There on the flat horizon stumbled a lone figure, staggering its way toward the lodge circle. Warriors snatched up their spears, staring, alert as wolves.

“One man alone hardly constitutes a threat,” Osheoan said mildly. “Why not go out there and see what he wants?”

The warriors dipped their spears in compliance. Some of them raced out from the lodges, using the swift, loose-limbed, ground-devouring jog that could wear down a running antelope. Osheoan, watching, suffered a moment’s doubt. He’d judged wisely, hadn’t he? Surely one man couldn’t be an enemy, not alone. And plainly injured, judging from that hesitant gait.

Injured? Or ill?

Oh, you idiot! What if he's bringing disease toward the lodges?

Osheoan snatched up his curing bundle and started after the men, determined to stop the stranger before he got too near. But then Osheoan froze, staring, feeling his heart leap painfully.

“Mikasha... ?” It was a wisp of sound.

Taller now, a man's body, no longer a boy, but—

“Mikasha!”

Osheoan didn't remember breaking into a run. He knew only that his son was here, his son had returned, and when Mikasha, face drawn and painfully thin, sagged suddenly, eyes closing, it was his father who caught him and eased him gently to the ground. *Grey robe*, Osheoan noted abstractedly, vaguely surprised, *Spirit-Speaker's robe*, though no Spirit-Speaker's ornaments, not yet, only the plain spirals of bone marking an apprentice. That Mikasha should be wearing them would mean something later, he knew it, something painful, but right now Osheoan could focus only on the sweetly stale smell of illness hovering about his son, the stain of old blood across Mikasha's chest.

With the aid of the wary, respectful warriors, Osheoan brought his son home, had him laid gently down on the Spirit-Speaker's own bed of soft furs. Staring down at Mikasha's thin, still face with its lines of suffering, remembering the plump, joyous little boy now forever lost, Osheoan blindly waved the warriors away. Alone with Mikasha, he knelt by his son's side, delicately peeling back the worn, stained robe, dreading what he might find.

The breath hissed between his teeth as he inhaled in shock. *Ohe*, bad.

A fiery weal cut across Mikasha's chest, the flesh on either side swollen and puffy, streaked with sullen red: the scar of what would have been a jagged wound, such as stone dagger might make (though who would deliberately harm a Spirit-Speaker?), or perhaps a miscast splinter of metal shattering at the cooling. Osheoan reached out to gently trace its length, then drew his hand back, alarmed at the fever heat he'd felt. This was no fresh injury. The skin had had time to close over it, deceptively, dangerously imitating true healing, hiding the sickness festering within, the slow, sure death.

Osheoan started, suddenly realizing that Mikasha was awake and watching him from fever-glazed eyes.

“Lie still,” Osheoan murmured. “I... will do what I can.”

“I thought the wound had healed.” It was the driest whisper of sound. “Shattered... knife shattered in the ritual... Power burst free...”

“What were you doing toying with Power?” Osheoan heard his voice come

out too harsh, too sharp, but couldn't stop himself from babbling on. "I told you, you have no Gift"—flinching inwardly at the familiar lie.

Mikasha stirred restlessly. "No. You were wrong. Too close to me, maybe. Power is there, burning... Had to learn to use it." He drew a deep, shuddering breath. "Found another Spirit-Speaker. Torik of the White Snake Clan... Said he would teach me, even if I was Wind Bird... not Snake..."

Mikasha's eyes closed. "Enough," Osheoan said softly. "Rest."

But his son continued, forcing out the words, "Hadn't taught me healing, though. Not Power healing. No time, before he... before the knife broke... killed him, hurt me. White Snake Clan tried to kill me, too. But I escaped." The feverish eyes snapped open, staring at Osheoan. "Came to Clan summer grounds, hoped lodges would still be here... Where else could I go? Father..."

His eyes closed again, voice trailing into silence. His thin form seemed to collapse in on itself, and Osheoan cried in sudden terror, "Mikasha?" then sighed in relief to see that his son still breathed. Grimly, the man forced himself under control and bent to examine the wound again, desperate for some reason for hope.

The wound had slashed across Mikasha's ribs and down, though how deep it had cut into the flesh, he couldn't tell by mere sight. It might have come perilously close to a lung... But Mikasha showed none of the terrifying blood froth on his lips that would mean a death wound. Still, who knew what other damage might have been done within?

And Osheoan's mind answered him cruelly, *A Spirit-Speaker would know.*

A true Spirit-Speaker. Not a Sham. The Power would stir within such a one and tell him what to do. The Power would guide his hand and heart, help him draw out the poison and heal the sick flesh...

"Power," Osheoan muttered.

Here was the heart of his fear, come before him at last: the one patient he might not aid by simple herbs, the one patient who, by dying, was going to reveal him as an imposter— And that one was his son, his son...

And what are you going to do? Osheoan's mind asked relentlessly. Let Mikasha die? All because you are afraid?

"No."

At least he still did have his basic knowledge of healing. It... must be enough.

But as Osheoan bent over his son's body, knife in hand, prepared to reopen the wound and let the poison drain, he was shaken by a spasm of pure terror. If only he *knew* exactly where to cut! What if his hand slipped? What if he cut too deeply,

or nicked one of the vital, blood-carrying vessels? Other men could call on the gods for help, but for him, the disbeliever, there was nothing, no one. And suddenly he could have wept like a child for his loneliness. Suddenly he ached in every twist of his being for belief, for any sign at all that he was not alone.

Please, oh please, help me.

“Now, why should we?”

Osheoan twisted wildly about. There in the lodge was... a fox, nothing more than one of the scrawny, silvery-furred foxes, stolen in from the plains. The man cried out as much in loss as in anger, and looked for something to hurl at the little scavenger.

“So quick to be rid of me?”

The non-voice tickled his mind. Osheoan froze, staring, slowly realizing what he faced. “You... can’t be...”

“Can’t I?” The fox shook itself and trotted forward a few deft paces, coming to a stop just out of his reach. *“Not elegant enough for you? You’d prefer an eagle, maybe, all talons and pride?”* Mocking amber eyes glanced up at him. *“Mm, yes, you’d like that, wouldn’t you? Sorry. I’m all you get.”*

“I’m not—I mean—You can’t be here,” Osheoan told the spirit-animal flatly. “Not now. Not after all this time.”

“Why not?” The fox sat without ceremony and began to nibble at its hind leg like a dog after a flea. “Ah,” it said, satisfied, *“got him.”* It looked up at Osheoan across its outstretched leg, gaze suddenly disconcertingly steady. *“Seems to me, it’s you to blame for ‘all this time,’ not us.”*

“Liar!” The word blazed out before Osheoan could block it.

The amber gaze hardened. *“Foolish. We never lie.”*

There was a world of warning in the suddenly cold voice, but the dam of Osheoan’s self-control had already shattered. Unable to stop himself, he felt all the years of pent-up bitterness come pouring out in a torrent of words. “Oh no, you never lie. You are too far above us poor little human folk for that. Too far above us for mercy, or pity— Standing by and watching a woman die...” But the first anguished frenzy was already ebbing. “Why?” Osheoan asked softly. “She was young, lovely, happy. Why did you take my Power from me just when I needed it the most?”

“We never did that.” Was that the faintest touch of sympathy in the wry non-voice? *“Come, use your head, man. Remember your training. Were you ever taught that, even with Power, you could save everyone?”*

“No, of course not. Some folk come sooner than others to the end of their life thread, no matter what a Spirit-Speaker may do to...”

Osheoan trailed to a stop. The fox laughed as a dog laughs, tongue lolling.

“So now! The man shows the dawning of wisdom.”

“It... was Seshawa’s appointed time? Is that what you’re saying?” Shaking, Osheoan gasped out, “Are you trying to tell me I didn’t lose my Power, but—myself?”

The fox shook itself impatiently. *“I’m not trying to tell you anything. Go ahead.”* It gestured toward Mi-kasha with its head. *“Your son is waiting.”*

A wave of renewed fear surged through Osheoan. “I—I can’t, I don’t have—”

“Keep saying that often enough, and you’ll make it true.” The fox gave a long, gaping yawn. *“Seems to me,”* it said, fixing Osheoan with a suddenly chill stare, *“that all I’ve heard from you is %’ T, “I.” You like being Spirit-Speaker, don’t you? You like Being Someone.”*

With an effort, Osheoan wrenched his gaze away. “I take pride in what I do. What’s wrong with that?”

“Did I say there was anything wrong? So now, here is a riddle for you: What if saving Mikasha here meant giving it all up, stopping being Spirit-Speaker now, totally, forever? What would you do?”

“What do you think?” Osheoan snapped. “I’d save my son!”

“Would you, now? Go ahead, then. Save him.”

Trying to ignore the mocking amber stare, Osheoan turned to his son and picked up his knife, studying Mi-kasha’s wound, forcing himself to decide where and how to begin. If he cut there... No. Too risky, too near the throat. There, then... No, no, if his hand slipped it would—His hand was sure to slip, shaking as it was, and—

“Stop staring at me!” he shouted at the fox.

“I?” the spirit-animal said blithely. *“I am doing nothing. I am only here.”*

Osheoan turned fiercely to his son again. But the fox’s riddle had insinuated itself into his mind, repeating tauntingly over and over: *“What if saving Mi-kasha meant giving up being Spirit-Speaker forever? What would you do?”*

Osheoan looked down at Mikasha’s pale face, seeing the unfinished softness of boy still hinted at beneath the firm lines of man, remembering that boy, all youth and earnestness, bubbling with laughter till his father had to laugh with him. And

such a rush of warmth swept over Osheoan that he could have wept, thinking of the wasted years after he'd driven Mikasha away...

And yet, and yet... To Osheoan's horror, he found himself remembering the people of the Clan watching him in awe, heeding every word he spoke, worshiping him, their wonder warm as love. To give it all up, to see folk eyeing him in scorn, despising him for being nothing—

As they had once despised Mikasha.

And I did nothing to stop them. Ah no, Osheoan cried in sudden silent agony, no more! I've hurt my son enough. I will not sacrifice his life to me!

"Guide my hand," he prayed, and began.

And Power rushed up to enfold him.

* * *

Osheoan slowly came back to himself, trembling with exhaustion, drained of Power, wondering dimly if it would ever return. Mikasha—

"It is done," said a quiet non-voice, and Osheoan turned to see the fox, all mockery gone from its eyes. *"The poison is drained, the wound healing. Your son shall live."*

"Thank you."

"I?" The fox sat abruptly and scratched its ear with a busy hind claw. *"I did nothing. You chose, Spirit-Speaker. You chose."* It scrambled to its feet, laughing. *"Now, choose again. Your son will make a fine Spirit-Speaker. If he is trained. Finish his training."*

"Or?"

"Or not."

"Will I lose my Power if I don't?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Who can say? Does it matter to you?"

Osheoan looked down to where Mikasha lay deep in healing slumber and thought of the difficult time ahead. He would be truthful to his son; he must. But would Mikasha understand? Could he forgive his father for the long, bitter lies of the past?

To his surprise, Osheoan heard himself give a soft, joyous laugh. Whatever happened, whether his Power ever returned, whether Mikasha forgave him or not, at least there was this: his son would live.

The fox, unnoted, had faded into empty air. But its final question still hung

lightly in the air: *Does the loss of Power matter to you?*

“No,” Osheoan said softly, and knew he spoke the truth. “It doesn’t matter at all.”