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The space between trees narrowed as the forest grew dense with tall pines and cedar. A thick canopy of leaves hid the sky as Running Bear trudged through the damp forest. The air was heavy with the smell of wet moss and earth. It rained earlier that day, and the soft ground squished beneath his bare feet. Beech twigs, although wet and softened, tore into his soles as he floundered through the brush.

Running Bear had never left home on his own. He'd be in trouble when the elders discovered what he'd done — but only if he failed. If he succeeded, they'd talk about the child who saved the Sioux for generations.

Ahead of him, the forest broke into a small clearing. The bright moon cast a shimmering silver glow on the dewy grass. Over the treetops, he could see the peak of Eagle Mountain.

His grandfather once told him of a cave that ran deep into the heart of the mountain. Somewhere inside was a stone carved with magical runes that held fantastic power — it gave its possessor the gift of foresight. A people more ancient than his earliest ancestors had sealed it within the mountain before the Sioux even existed. *If I can find the stone, I can stop the bloodshed.*

The sudden urgency of his task overwhelmed him. His heart raced, and his muscles twitched and itched. It felt like his skeleton wanted to burst from his skin and run naked through the forest. Anxiety clouded his mind and the

surrounding forest became alive with malice. His breathing quickened and his lungs burned. Running Bear collapsed to his knees, clawing at his chest and drawing blood. He fell forward, but the moment his face touched the cool, wet grass, the world seemed to soften and the air grew pleasant. He sucked in huge, desperate gasps, and an indescribable peace settled over him.

Running Bear almost gave himself to the spirits when something caught his eye. A shooting star careened through the darkness toward the mountain. Its tail was long and shone with magnificent hues of red, blue, yellow and green. They swirled and mixed, forming colors he'd never seen before and making his head spin.

"Running Bear," someone called from the darkness. The voice was baritone and somehow came from all directions at once. Still, there was something calming about it. Running Bear lifted his head but saw no one.

"Running Bear," it called again. A giant stone figure emerged from the shadows of the forest. It was twice his size, its head reaching almost to the treetops. As moonlight fell upon its face, Running Bear saw it had no features. In place of eyes, nose, ears and mouth, there was nothing but smooth stone. "Running Bear. Get up."

The stone man stepped closer and Running Bear scrambled to his feet.

"Who . . . Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Iya."

"Iya?" Running Bear gasped. Iya was the Sioux god of justice. Running Bear brought his fist to his heart and bowed his head. "Great god of justice and mercy, I beg your help."

"What is it you seek?"

"The stone in the mountain. The one made by people long ago."

"I know the object you pursue, but man did not make it."

Running Bear cocked his head.

"I don't understand."

"Nor would I expect you to, child. You are young, as are your people," Iya said. "Ones from a moon beyond your moon created the stone. They have not returned for thousands of years."

"Were they gods, like you?"

"No, they were not gods. They came to this world from the stars, but they were mortal, as you are."

People from the stars? The idea made his head swim.

"How can I find it? The stone?"

"I'm sorry, child. The stone no longer exists."

Running Bear's heart sank. If he couldn't find the stone, the pale trespassers would massacre his entire tribe.

"What . . . What do you mean it doesn't exist?"

"The stone once lay deep in the mountain of eagles, but no longer."

“Then where is it?” Running Bear pleaded. He *needed* that stone.

“I do not know, child. I’m sorry, I cannot help you with your quest.”

Running Bear fought back tears and buried his face in his hands. When he looked up again, Iya was gone, and he was once more alone in the dark night.

The shattering anxiety returned. His muscles contracted in great spasms, shaking his entire body, and he collapsed backward into the grass. The last thing he saw was the bright tail of the falling star, its colors slowly melting into the black, midnight ether.

Joseph Talbot ducked beneath the limbs of a tall birch. Gray Fox, his tracker, rode a few paces ahead of him. The Sioux man never needed to dodge the sharp branches. Instead, they seemed to recede on their own to make way for his passing.

“The trail is gone,” Gray Fox said, turning his horse to address Joseph. For three days, they had tracked a horse thief out of Saint Paul. Joseph was new to bounty hunting, but Gray Fox had a mystifying instinct for tracking a fugitive. He could discern whether a man fled east or west by the angle of a snapped twig or matted leaves. Joseph scanned the cold wilderness and scoffed.

“He can’t rightly just disappear,” he said. Gray Fox ignored him and pointed through the trees.

“Clearing ahead. We stop there and eat.”

Joseph let out a deep sigh and pursed his lips. He needed the reward to pay off his debt in Saint Paul. While most folks in the city had a fondness for Three-Card Stud, Joseph had always been drawn to the Faro tables. Poker was too slow for his liking. Faro was exhilarating and usually kinder to his wallet.

Usually.

The shocking deficit he accumulated earlier that week had changed everything, and the men he owed money to were not the forgiving kind. Joseph briefly considered fleeing back to his family’s ranch in Oklahoma.

But first, he did what any sober man would do when faced with crippling debt — he got drunk. *Excessively* drunk. Gray Fox found him sprawled on the muddy street and carried him back to his room. When Joseph awoke the next day to find a Sioux man sitting across from his bed, his first instinct was to pull his gun. Before he could, Gray Fox held up the bounty poster. Joseph’s eyes went wide when he saw the reward. Gray Fox needed a second man for the hunt and offered to split the money. Joseph never gave it a second thought.

As they entered the clearing, a dull whining interrupted his musing.

“What’s that noise?” Joseph drew his revolver and cocked the hammer. Gray Fox jumped down from his horse and followed the sound. When Joseph sidled up next to him, he saw a young boy laying half-naked in the grass. He

spasmed and flopped like a fish on shore, both hands clenched into white-knuckled fists. His eyes rolled back into his head, the whites now an oozy red from bursting blood vessels. Gray Fox examined the child.

“Poison,” he said, and felt the boy’s forehead. Joseph settled the hammer and rested the gun on the horn of his saddle. “Sweet flag flower. Grows in wetlands. Sioux eat it to talk with spirits.”

“Should we take him back to Saint Paul?” Joseph didn’t want to return empty-handed, but he couldn’t leave the child to die. Gray Fox shook his head.

“No. Ate too much.” The Sioux man stood and eyed Joseph’s revolver. “Must put him out of misery.”

Joseph grimaced at the suggestion. He didn’t want to shoot a child, even if it *was* a mercy.

“He is in great pain,” Gray Wolf insisted. “Send him to his ancestors.”

“God be with you, kid,” Joseph sighed. He cocked his gun again, and the sharp click of the hammer made him flinch. With a deep breath, he leveled the revolver at Running Bear’s head and pulled the trigger.