

## The man on the mountain

The sky was angry that day. It burned a blood red, a foretelling of danger. Though it was not the season, thunder wracked the skies and lightning struck the land, scorching the ground and setting fires that would burn for days.

And amongst it all, the heavens filled with burning rocks that streaked across the sky before exploding in bright flashes and thundering booms which frightened both young and old alike.

The elders blamed the mountain, or the gods we had somehow displeased, but the tributes we had paid this season were plentiful and the mountain remained silent.

This was something different.

The ferocious display lasted for two days and nights, before ending abruptly, the priests pleased that their prayers had been heeded.

And that was the day I found the man on the mountain.

I was hunting in the foothills above the village when I first saw him. A strange creature, with long limbs and pale skin.

I was afraid. Was this a demon cast down by the gods? Was the storm a battle in the heavens, this creature banished here?

He lay by a stream, one hand scooping water greedily to his face. He hadn't seen me. I considered running, but curiosity got the better of me.

I approached cautiously, my bow drawn. From that distance I wouldn't miss if I felt threatened.

A branch cracked underfoot and the creature stopped and looked at me. He tried to stand, perhaps to flee, possibly to attack, though the stranger could do neither. His other hand, which had been concealed beneath his body, covered a wound on his midriff. Dried blood seeped through his strange garments.

He raised his free hand, his eyes wide and scrambled backwards, but there was nowhere for him to go, the stream blocked his path.

Though I had never seen a creature like this before, I had seen the look in his eyes a thousand times when hunting. Fear.

Slowly, I lowered my bow and placed it on the ground next to me, along with my arrows. I did the same with the small knife I kept on my belt, the creature recalled when he saw me draw it, but relaxed when I placed it on the ground.

Careful not to make any sudden movements, I made my way across to him until I was in touching distance. There I stopped, still unsure as to the nature of this being.

I spoke my name, tapping my chest as I did so. He looked at me with unsure eyes. Could he even talk? I had assumed he could, despite his differences to me he had many similarities.

I repeated myself and this time he responded. Tapping his own chest.

*“Morris”*

A strange name but somehow befitting for this stranger.

I gestured to the wound on his side, which he still guarded. Again, I tapped my own body in the same place. This time understanding came more easily and slowly he removed his hand.

Fresh blood trickled from the injury and now I could see his body had been pierced by a shard of polished metal.

My hand reached for my medicine pouch, searching for the mosses that I carried to stop bleeding. I had no idea if they would work on his kind but I applied them anyway.

The man groaned and laid back onto the ground. His eyes rolled back and he slipped into unconsciousness.

While he slept I worked to heal his wounds. I removed the foreign object with ease which triggered a fresh wave blood, easily

managed by the application of more moss and bandaged him with cloth.

Sometime later, when the sun sat low in the sky the man awoke. I had built a small fire and cooked some of the days catch across its flames.

I offered him some, which he took gingerly and after a cautious nibble, devoured hungrily.

After, he reached beneath his garment and produced a small metal trinket on a thin chain. He held it in the palm of his hand. I looked at it. Did he intend me to take it? Was it a gift for saving his life?

I slowly reached out, and when he didn't recall, I took the offering and held it in my hand.

The creature gestured that I should wear it around my neck. Unsure I studied the amulet more closely but saw nothing that might harm me.

So far nothing about this man had given me concern that he meant me harm. To foster good will I did as he asked.

He smiled and laid back under the first stars to appear in the dimming sky.

It was getting late and the others in my tribe would be concerned were I not to return so I stood to leave. The man nodded at me, as if he understood I needed to go.

I couldn't bring him with me, it would frighten the others and it would not be safe for him. I tried to convey this in a look, and although I could not be sure, he appeared to understand. He didn't follow me as I descended the mountain.

The next day I returned to the mountain, and found the man where I had left him. He had constructed a small shelter from the undergrowth and had moved the fire to its entrance.

I had not to told anyone about him, for the more fearful members of the tribe would hunt him down and kill him. But he was no danger. I could see it in his eyes, which today were more alive than ever. His wounds were healing well and he could move more freely.

He motioned to the gift he had given me the night before and was pleased I still wore it. More days passed until one day, with his wound nearly healed, he asked me to follow him.

He climbed further up the mountain. Here scattered around were more shards of metal, like the one that had injured him. As we scaled ever higher the pieces grew larger, until we found one that was big enough for him to climb inside.

I stayed back, unsure as to what these strange fragments from the skies were, but the gleam in my new friend's eyes told me it was safe.

Moments later he returned with more gifts in his hands, though I could see these were not for me. Amongst them, another amulet like me own, which he placed around his own neck.

My amulet vibrated in resonance with his and now he spoke. I heard his word in my mind, his mouth did not speak them.

"My friend," he said. "Now I can hear you, as you can hear me. Do not be afraid, this is how we communicate. I thank you for helping me and now I will help you. Heed this warning. Others, some like me, some not, mean to take your lands from you. Your land is plentiful and they covet it. You cannot fight them, they are beyond your power or understanding."

"Then you will help us?" I thought the words and he heard them.

"I have tried and so have others. We fought a battle in the skies above your land, but we were too few against too many. All I can do for you now is to help you leave this place."

“But we cannot. These are our sacred lands, we have lived here for generations. A bountiful paradise provided by the gods. We would dishonour them by abandoning this place.”

“You cannot win. I offer you an escape. There are lands to the south I can take you. The climate is harsher and the land and the rivers will not provide as much, but you will survive.”

“We shall not run, we shall fight. Our gods will protect us.”

“My child, we have been protecting you, but we no longer have that power, so I offer you this chance. Your time is short.”

“The decision is not mine to make, I am not a leader amongst my people.”

“Then it is time for that to change. Return to your tribe, tell the others of me and the words I have spoken. In two nights I shall come to your village. Any who wish to leave can do so with me then.”

\*\*\*\*\*

As I look now into the elder's eyes I can see they do not believe me. The rantings of mad fool. Tonight is the third night. My friend did not return yesterday as he had promised. Was I deceived? I went to the mountain today, but he was gone.

And now the ground shakes and the screams begin. I look to the skies. The stars are gone, replaced by a foreboding darkness as something huge descends. I raise my bow and point it to the gods.

We will fight for our land, even if it means our end.