

Coyote and the Guardians' Fire

I saw Coyote sitting out under the pine trees not too long ago. This was worrisome to me. Not because he was smiling that slow, dangerous smile. Not because he was out of breath. Not because the tip of his tail was scorched white. No, those were not why, but they helped.

What worried me most was the fact that Coyote was showing his old wily face to me again, which he only does when he's done something risky.

"Pehnaho, Isapaippeh," I called. *Hello, Old Man Coyote.* There was no avoiding Coyote when he had a story to tell.

"Pehnaho, nai'bi," he said in his light, rough voice, panting. *Hello, pretty girl.* "What a tale I have for you today! Sit, sit."

I sat. When a force of nature calls to you, you listen. Coyote was certainly no exception. "What have you done this time?"

He laughed the way dry rocks scrape together. *Ehhehhehhehh.* "You think I am a villain."

I shrugged. "Sometimes."

"You are learning, nai'bi," he said with a grin that made my pulse quicken. *Be careful of Isapaippeh,* my father once told my sisters and me. *He is a twisted thing.* Coyote stretched his long, sandy legs. "But I am not the bad one this time. In fact, I am a hero." He paused, waiting for a reaction.

"Oh?" I said, raising my eyebrows.

"Haa'." *Yes.* He stopped again. This was growing tiresome.

"And what have you done that was so noble?"

He smiled again, a secret smile. "I have stolen fire and split it up for all people."

I rolled my eyes and fiddled with the fringe of my shirt. "Isapaippeh, we already have fire."

"Now you can make it."

"We do that, too."

"Now you can call it forth like water." My fingers stopped their fidgeting. Fire was never easy to build. You needed the blessing of a holy man for the tiniest flame. Coyote laughed again.

“That shut you up.” He took a step closer to me and sat down. “Are you still spitting venom, or are you ready to listen?”

“Haa’, Isapaippeh. Just tell me your story.”

He made a face. “You are still spitting venom, but I will tell you anyway.” He leaned against the base of a pine tree.

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I was walking and talking with some friends, as I like to do. We told stories and jokes for hours. We talked of many things—perhaps everything—until the sun crawled back under the ground.

It was very dark when we ran out of things to talk about. I was bored. I turned to Stinkbug. “What can we do now, my friend?” He thought of nothing. I turned to Porcupine. “What can we do now, my friend?” But he thought of nothing as well. I turned to Rat. “And you, my friend. What can we do?”

Rat stroked his long tail. “We could build a fire, Isapaippeh. It is getting cold with no sun to warm us.” He was right; it was quite cold. The wind was—

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Coyote paused, looking at the tree branches rattling in the breeze. “Well, the wind was doing what it always does. Tell me, nai’bi, have I ever told you about the time I stole the wind?”

“One story at a time, please,” I sighed.

It was his turn to roll his eyes. “One day you will have no venom left to spit, and all you will do is open and close your mouth like a pretty little fish. Now, where did I leave off?”

“Rat said to build a fire.”

“Yes, yes. But making fires, as you know, is very difficult.”

“Rat,” Stink bug said to him, “we do not have anything to build a fire with.” All of them looked back at the smartest one to think of a plan.

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“And the smartest one was you, wasn’t it?” I said.

“Of course. So they all looked at me, expecting me to save them. “I have an idea that will keep us warm, fed, and amused,” I said, “but you will all need to help me.”

“Yes, yes, Isapaippeh,” they cried, “tell us what we must do.”

“I leaned in closer to them and said, “We are going to steal fire.”

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“You can’t steal fire!” I exclaimed. “It doesn’t belong to anybody!”

Coyote huffed. “If you keep interrupting me, I will never finish, and you will have to listen to me talk until the end of days.”

“But—”

“*Quiet, nai’bi.* You give me no time to explain myself.” He lay down, propping his chin up on one hand and drawing in the dirt with the other.

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This was a special fire. A magic fire. The best fire there is. It is very warm, but you can hold it in your hands like this dust without getting hurt, and it makes the most beautiful golden light. A pack of things that were men but not men created it many, many years before you were born, and they were strong and beautiful and jealous and cruel.

You have probably guessed that this is the fire I wished to steal. My friends were eager to steal it, too, although they were more frightened of the beings that guarded it than I was. “How will we do this, Isapaippeh? The guardians are too powerful for my quills,” said Porcupine.

“And they will not run away from my smell,” said Stinkbug.

“We cannot fight them with quills or stench. We must trick them instead,” said Rat, who is almost as clever as me.

“Isapaippeh, you said this would amuse us! This doesn’t sound fun at all!” Stinkbug wailed.

“Who says tricking them isn’t fun? We will be disguised as happy visitors, dancing and singing and eating with them.” I told them.

“How can we dance, sing, and eat and still steal the fire? Your plan will kill us, Isapaippeh!” Porcupine cried.

“Only one of us needs to steal the fire, and that will be me. Your jobs will be to entertain and be entertained while I work,” I told them.

So we ran to where the guardians lived, which was not far. We had walked for so long, we were in the desert! Now, I had pulled tricks on these guardians before. They would attack if I went as my regular attractive self. I made a wig out of bark to cover my head.

“Is that cedar I smell?” Rat asked with a quivering snout. When his nose lead him back to my wig, he jumped. “Oh, Isapaippeh! How wonderful you smell! And how handsome you look!” It was true that I looked quite good in that wig. Sometimes I wonder if I should make another.

By now we were at the guardians' camp. “Pehnaho, guardians of beautiful fire!” I called. “Can my friends and I spend the evening in your company?”

“Pehnaho, strange travelers,” they responded. “You may stay and feast with us so long as you do not cause trouble.”

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I sat up straighter, confused. “Wait, they invited you into their home just like that? I thought you said they were cruel.”

“They were.” He drew pictures of tall, serious-looking figures in the dirt by my feet. “How could you invite me to a feast and tell me not to cause trouble?”

“You were in disguise,” I pointed out.

Coyote rolled onto his back and chuckled. “Are you trying to ruin the story?”

“I can't ruin a story that's already flawed.”

“Ooh!” He placed his hands over his heart, pretending to be hurt. “And here I was, believing myself immune to your poison! They were harsh for other reasons, nai'bi, but those are stories for other times.

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Even though they were cold and pitiless, the guardians excelled in celebration. Their food was delicious, their songs were lively, and their dances were wild. All of my friends were having a good time. Stinkbug tried to impress them by jumping up and down, but they did not pay much attention. Rat taught them a few games, which they loved. Porcupine became famous for his quills, which shone beautifully in the firelight.

And me? I told stories that made them gasp like windstorms and laugh until they fell over. I smiled at all the girls and danced with the prettiest ones.

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He grinned. “Oh, how I danced that night! Remind me to dance like that with you one day, nai'bi.”

I shifted from one sitting position to another, growing uncomfortable under his stare. *Be careful of Isapaippeh. He is a twisted thing*, said my father in my head.

If Coyote noticed, he did not show it.

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I never forgot why I came, however. After the last dance, I went up to the fire and whispered for it to jump into my wig. When it did, everything went dark. Stinkbug, Porcupine, and Rat ran off with me into the night.

Unfortunately, the fire in my wig looked out to see the commotion and lit up my face. "It's Isapaippeh! He's stealing our one great treasure, our fire!" the guardians cried. Without a second to waste, they began chasing us. My friends and I padded across the desert, paws and feet pushing off the ground swifter than the wind that raced past us.

Unfortunately, Porcupine and Stinkbug ran less like wind and more like swamp gas. The guardians grabbed them first. "Where is our fire?" they screamed.

"We don't know," answered Stinkbug and Porcupine. It was true. I had it, but they didn't know where I had gone in the darkness. The guardians let them go and continued hunting me.

Rat and I were fast, but the guardians ran like demons. They chased us over hot mesas and cool mountains, through soft valleys and great stone arches, through coursing rivers and sticky wetlands, everywhere. No matter where we went, the guardians followed.

It was exhausting. I was already tired and sore from so much dancing that I could not run any longer. "Rat!" I called. "Catch!" I tossed him the cedar wig. He caught it and carried it under his belly. Unfortunately, a piece of the wig smoldering with the fire landed on my tail. The whole tip of my beautiful tail glowed like a torch.

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"Isapaippeh!" I groaned in frustration. "You said the fire couldn't burn you!"

"That I did. But that is only true when the fire is not scared."

"Oh, of *course*."

"Nai'bi." Coyote sighed. "Why do I even try?" He settled back into the dust.

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Since the *scared fire* panicked and lit up my poor tail, the guardians could find me easily. I stopped even trying to flee. "We have you now, thief!" they cried. "Hand over our treasure!"

"I do not have your stupid, tail-burning fire!" I said, watching my tail smoke. "I must have dropped it somewhere back in the desert after it attacked me."

They growled, but let me go. "If we find out that you're lying, Isapaippeh, we will find you and we will skin you."

"Yes, yes," I said, still hurt but also still a wonderful liar. "Now go and leave me be. You and your fire have caused enough trouble." The guardians ran back the way they came, wailing and cursing with anger. I am not jealous of anyone or anything that blocked their path.

I rested a while, then walked back to where my friends and I had started the whole adventure, which is near where you live, so I decided to come and tell you. Which was a bad choice, since you do not appreciate my thrilling tales. The end.

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I ignored his insult. "What happened to Rat?"

Coyote raised his eyebrows. "What's this? Is my nai'bi asking to continue a story?"

I had fallen right into his trap. "Please just tell me," I said, slumping a little.

"Oh, no you don't. Just because you are pretty does not mean I will do anything for you. First I want an apology."

I sat back up. "Apology? For what?!"

"For being so rude. Also for interrupting me so much. Make that two apologies."

"Fine! I'm sorry for being rude, and I'm sorry for interrupting you." I leaned forward.

"Now, what happened to Rat?"

Coyote didn't even blink. "I didn't tell you *how* I wanted you to apologize."

*"Isapaippeh."*

"I will accept a kiss as your apology."

"I'm leaving." I got to my feet and turned around, heading back toward camp. "My sisters will be worried, anyway."

"Nai'bi, wait!" Coyote cried. "Don't you want to know how it's possible that your camp has such a large, roaring fire?"

I looked back toward home. Sure enough, the fire was so big its tips flickered over the tops of our tipis. Though curiosity tugged at my mind, my will to stay dignified was stronger.

"I'm not kissing you, Isapaippeh."

He made a disdainful clicking sound. "*Fine*. I accept your boring, verbal apologies. Now come back and let me finish the story."

I walked back to the base of the pine tree and knelt in the dirt. “Why do you tell me all these things, anyway?”

“Because I like spending time with beautiful young women.”

“There are plenty of other pretty girls at camp to tell stories to.”

“I know,” he said, “but you retell my stories best.” He stretched. “And now, the last part of my adventure.”

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While I dealt with the guardians, Rat continued to run north. We agreed whoever finally escaped the guardians would divide up the fire to the four corners of the world. The fire was too wonderful, too special not to share.

From there, I guess he showed the fire to the other animals, who showed its secrets to men. The warmth and light of fire will teach the world many things, and we will learn from it and get hurt from it and rebuild with it until the day the sun drops dead.

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“I see you have mastered it already,” he chuckled. “That’s the thing about your kind. You learn so fast—sometimes too fast for your own good.” He paused. “To be honest, I did not know for certain that Rat had succeeded until I glanced back towards your home.”

“So many chores will be easier,” I breathed, staring at the fire. “We can keep warm during a cold snap now, and we can cook meals faster...”

Coyote smiled his secret smile. “I know I can be bad, but I am not always the villain.”

“I know that, Isapaippeh, I just—” An unearthly chorus of howls cut me off. The noise was dissonant and frightening. The whole forest shook, causing flocks of birds and groups of other creatures scurrying off. I fought the urge to bolt.

“Maybe I did not fully escape after all,” Coyote laughed, but his voice was ragged and tired. “My guess is the guardians did not find their treasure in the desert. Instead, they must have found it everywhere. Now that everyone has it, the fire is no longer special. It’s just fire.” He glanced over his shoulder. “I should probably run.” He made a face. “I do not want to run anymore. In the name of the Creator, I am *tired*.”

“Well, thanks for the story,” I said.

“Anytime, nai’bi,” he replied, sauntering into the woods. “Something tells me I will have another tale for you soon.” Suddenly he stopped, looking back at me over his shoulder. “Oh, I would hurry back to your people. I don’t think you would like the guardians.”

Without another word, I sprinted back home.

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When I finally arrived, my sisters rushed to see me. “Little sister! You’re not going to believe this! One of the men called the fire just by rubbing sticks together—no blessing!”

“Why are you always staying out for so long?” asked another.

“Did you hear that noise?” said a third sister.

“Do you know what caused it?” inquired a fourth.

I was surrounded by curious sisters until my mother, father, and the chieftain walked through. “Sorry for being late,” I said sheepishly.

“You were with Isapaippeh again, weren’t you?” my mother said. “Oh, my daughter, I have told you to be careful so many times—”

“She needs to stay away from him,” the chieftain hissed to my father. “Have you forgotten what happened to the last group we met?”

“I cannot control what Isapaippeh does any more than you can. Besides, my girl is not stupid. She knows he is devious.” he replied. The chieftain merely grunted. Mother pinched the bridge of her long nose.

Everyone was quiet. The entire settlement had seen the commotion, and all eyes were on me. I cleared my throat and stepped out from the group. “Yes, I saw Isapaippeh today, and I saw the fire, and I heard the noise.” I stared the ground, shifting my weight from one foot to the other. “And, as you have probably guessed, they are connected.”

The holy man stuck his head out from his tipi. “I knew it! I knew this was the trickster’s work!”

An expectant silence covered the camp again. “Well?” the chieftain prompted.

I smiled. “This is the best story yet.”