

Spirit Elk

Speaker of Legends looked like he had been old in The Before Time. He was thin and bent as a tree that has battled long with cold winds, and his skin was a painting of deep creases around his mouth and his ancient eyes. His hair had become white as winter snow and it lay limp against his head. But his voice was listened to by every ear in the tribe, because through it sang songs of wisdom and great knowledge. Evening was coming and the first bone-yellow sliver of the moon was beginning to peek over the black silhouette of the trees when he sat on a deer hide and filled his pipe. He took a twig from the fire and lit the tobacco, puffing gently to start it going, and then his eyes focused on a boy sitting around the storyfire. “Tonight’s story will be long,” he said. “The fire will need more wood.” Quickly the boy clambered to his feet, firelight reflecting gold and orange from his red-bronze skin, and dashed for the woodpile so as not to miss a single word of Speaker of Legends’ story.

When the boy had brought more wood, Speaker of Legends crossed his legs and puffed on his pipe. “The story I tell you tonight,” he began, “is not so old a story. Many stories I tell you are from The Before Time, when there were no men in the forest. There was only the Great Spirit, the sun, and the moon, and the stars in the sky; the animals and trees and mountains and waters here below. The spirits and animals made the stories and told them to men later. Men told the stories to their children, who told them to their children, and so they have come down to us from The Before Time. But this story is not so old. It happened after men were made into the world.

“Another reason this story is different,” he continued, “is because it is not a happy story. Many stories I have told you – about how Robin burned his chest red by bringing lightning to Wolf for warmth, and Fox stole it and was burned red part of each year – about how Coyote, the tricky Coyote, once walked on two legs but tried to fool the Great Spirit and so was made to walk on four legs forever after – how small men came from the star lights,” and he lifted his arm, fringes dangling from his buckskins like icicles, to point to the heavens, “to teach the first man how to build a houngan so he would have a warm place to live – all these are happy stories. But this story is a story to warn you about danger.” The youngsters seated around the storyfire shifted nervously. Speaker of Legends’ stories were sometimes frightening, but he had never before told them a story with such a cautionary beginning. Speaker of Legends puffed his pipe and began to speak, his words like wings to carry his rapt listeners to another time and place.

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