Aitsan, the Indian

As the morning sun stretched each limb over the earth, casting long shadows along the grass, another shadow grew and lengthened as Aitsan stood to greet the morning air with a yell. It was his third day alone in the Great open and his heart pounded with the exhilaration and excitement of the new day full of adventures. He stood, legs astride, a proud figure displaying his new manhood to the skies, the fronds on his trousers blowing gently in the morning breeze, his arms raised in joyful exultation with the Great Spirit. This day the Spirit would provide a special test for Aitsan to prove his manhood, and soon when the time came, he would return to his village triumphant in his strength and character, to be welcomed into the manhood of the tribe and allowed to take his place in the Kiva, the Sacred Ceremonial Chamber. At that time, too, Aitsan would receive his own name.

The young Indian allowed these thoughts to calm him as he folded his blanket, lovingly woven by his mother, tied it around his waist and set out on his day's adventures. As the sun rose, the warmth filled Aitsan's heart with courage and expectation, and he ran on towards the hills far in the shimmering distance.

As he ran the way became dustier and less grass, more rocks. The small blisters on the horizon became larger, brighter against the blue cloudless sky, and the air in Aitsan's churning lungs was drier. Under his feet small lizards ran, scuttling in their fear and surprise, the soft leather of Aitsan's moccasins covering any but the gentlest vibrations of his running feet. As he ran alone in the vast emptiness, Aitsan's mind was peaceful, his heart and his breath heaving together at one with the brightness of the day and the warmth of the Great Spirit moving far above. Aitsan thought upon his village and the loved ones he had left for a while, and in the hazy desert light he thought he saw a young woman kneeling over her fireplace grinding meal – her long black hair touching the dust, gently blowing in the wind, now veiling her face, now drifting to the side to give a glimpse of her dark eyes, her clear brows furrowed in concentration, and scarcely realising it, Aitsan lengthened his stride and quickened hi space, as if to reach her more quickly, and yet, even as he reached the place of his vision she disappeared into the dust and became nothing but the flick of a lizard's tail and the sighing of the wind.

By now the sun had risen to its peak, watching the Indian moving swiftly far below as an eagle watches her young from her place in the clouds, and Aitsan brushed the beads of sweat from his cheeks with his arm. Now the hills towered before him as the Pyramids towered above his ancient cousins, and he sheltered his eyes to study them. Breaking into the perfect blue of the sky was a solitary cloud, a puff of white cresting the hill, and Aitsan smiled at the Great Spirit for providing the sign he had been waiting for. His long muscular legs, weary, yet not aching, carried him over the rocks and stones, his bright eyes alert and watching for any small signs and movements his hand at his knife ready to slay any creature slyly slithering upon him. The coarse edges of the weathered and timeless rocks bruised his hands, but they were used to bruises and he did not pause, but levered himself to a higher level, climbing, jumping and leaping like a gazelle, his dark skin glistening smooth and bronzed against the pale, dry hillside, health and vigour against barrenness.

Again he paused and shielded his eyes from the sun taking too much intimate an interest in his journey. Against the stark line of the hill against the sky there was a rugged old tree, low and close to the ground, its branches gnarled and bent, fighting in constant war with the forces around it. A Joshua tree. Aitsan knew of this place – the small spring in the middle of barrenness. He had dreamt of this place and now he had come upon it – guided by the Great Spirit.

His broad chest heaved as he climbed the last rock and looked down. There beneath him was the gem set in the rocks; the deep, dark spring; the secret closely guarded. A thrill went through his body and he drank in the sight. Before feeding his body, he would feed his soul, and he turned to survey the great land stretching out beneath him in all directions. His heart rose on that highest peak and it seemed almost as if the Great Spirit Himself came down to greet him and celebrate with him.

Aitsan laughed at the thought and turned to the spring, climbing deeper into the mouth of the hill's womb to sip some of its life, his heart singing adoration to the Great Open and all of Nature's joys. When his belly was as full as his heart he climbed out of the cavern, and almost lost his breath in surprise.

There by his dusty foot was a beautiful bird, red in feather and great in size, yet it was not moving, and the place for eagles was in the skies not on the ground.

Aitsan knelt by the bird and put a loving hand to its chest. He could feel a tiny beating, the throb of Nature, still within the bird – yet it lacked its strength. Aitsan gently gathered the bird in his hands and carried it to the dark pool. In the cool shade the bird began to move its wings, twitching nervously and in pain. Aitsan noticed a redness on his hands not there before and examined the bird to find its wound. With care and concern he unwrapped his blanket and, dipping a corner in the water he bathed the wound, and prayed for Nature to heal her glorious symbol of power. He looked around him, but he could see no guilty culprit for the injury. As the day passed, the sun bade its farewell and surrendered to the moon. Aitsan watched over the eagle lovingly, leaving it only to search in the darkness for scorpions and other insects, forgetting his own peril for the sake of his fellow creature. The eagle regained consciousness but remained weak and eagerly gulped the tiny morsels of food Aitsan fed it, carefully avoiding hurting the hand of the giver with the sharpness of her beak.

In the coolness of the night, refreshed and strengthened, the eagle stretched her wings. Aitsan opened his eyes wide to see the glory of the eagle so close to his hands; the red feathers gilded with silver in the moon's gentle light. Its beak flashed glorious colours on to the turquoise jewellery Aitsan wore, and its eye split into many flashes of gold and silver catching the stars and tossing them back into the darkness with an arrogance that thrilled his belly. In one evil moment Aitsan found the temptation to kill this glorious beast and have the feathers made into a victory cloak for his return, but as the eye of the eagle pierced his soul he turned his back on the idea and offered his hand to the eagle.

His heart fluttered in anticipation as the eagle watched him carefully, examining his very existence in her stare, and finally took her place on his wrist. He stood, arms raised to the night, a strong figure against the countless specks of light that filled the sky like bright beads of silver woven into fine cloth. The eagle stretched her wings,

and with one wild beating with which Aitsan's heart rose – beating wildly also, she flew deep into the night. Aitsan exulted with the oneness in Nature he had experienced and treasured the moments with his eagle even in his dreams.

As he awoke it was day, bright and hot, and he was surprised at his tardiness. His Spirit told him it was a time to return and as he prepared for the journey he took a last deep drink from the pool. "Fare thee well", he breathed and prayed in his soul for the well-being of the eagle he had saved from death in that land of death, and he stretched his neck and looked far above; but no wings marred the perfect blueness of the sky.

Sorrowful but not disheartened, Aitsan began his descent and started his journey home. This time as the ground turned from rock to grass, and dust to moisture, his heart became refreshed, and once more his mind turned towards the tipees of the ones he loved somewhere ahead of him in the far distance. Still his heart remained behind him, in the rocks and the dust and the dryness – where a beautiful red eagle now breathed life, because of him. And the memory was joyful as it was sad, for as he was glad he had known the eagle, so he was sad to have left her. And as the sun sank behind the tiny swellings of land in the distance, so Aitsan's heart joined it, sinking too, into the hill.

Then the flapping, whipping noise alarmed him, and his reverie was cracked and his pace was broken. His foot caught a stone and he nearly fell in his surprise for from somewhere came the eagle. His heart was at once full of joy and afraid of the power and unexpectedness of the attack, and the eagle circled low in front of him and rose into the darkening sky behind. Aitsan cried aloud for the eagle to wait, but it was gone. Silence came thundering in, rebounding in the plains and filling the emptiness; and the stars drew a curtain across the earth.

Aitsan opened his blanket with love and looked at the symbols woven in its pattern. Another mark would have to be added now, he thought – that of the eagle, for its life is now part of mine as surely as I gave it life. And he slept deeply, knowing the eagle would join him in his dreams, as it would on his journey.

As the days came and went Aitsan did not slacken his pace, knowing that at some time when the sun was low and the night was young, then the eagle would comfort his lonely journey with her company. Finally one afternoon, as his shadow led the way before him, he saw it pointed to a small puff of smoke on the horizon, and he knew he had come home. He wondered in his heart whether the eagle would follow him this far, and gently caressed the feather, deep red and gold in the sun's fading rays, a remembrance given by the eagle the night before. This at least should prove my story, he thought.

While he was still a mile or so away, he heard the songs and cries, and the men of the tribe came on horseback to welcome him. He caught the mane of a horse they led for him, was swung up, and entered the village in victory. It was ablaze with colour in honour of his return and was resounding with joyful music.

When he was welcomed and kissed by all individually, and was finally sitting beside his betrothed in the tribal circle, the wisest and oldest of the men turned to him.

“My son,” he said, “tell us; what secrets did you find? What treasures did the Great Spirit reveal to you?”

And Aitsan stood, his hand moving to his side. But before he could take out the feather, there was the sound he knew and loved best of all, and the village stood in awe to see the majesty of the eagle flying so close to their heads. Aitsan raised his arms as he had learnt to do, and the eagle came to rest on his wrist. The Chief was silent but his heart sang and his face was radiant as he saw the young Indian with his tamed eagle.

“Who is it that can tame the wildest creature; the most noble, strong and free? What power have you that are still so young?”

“None, Father of the Tribe, but the power of compassion, the strength of gentleness and the freedom of humility in awe of the Great Spirit.” Aitsan answered.

“I did not tame the bird – she has come to me of her own free will. I only gave her life; and she frees my spirit – to fly far above, where no man can fly. I cannot scorn her – who can see a thousand miles in one glance when I can see but one; and can travel many while I only take one step. She has blessed me and I thank the Spirit who sent her to teach me humility and love instead of pride.”

“You have learnt a great lesson of manhood, my son. From this moment you shall be called Red Eagle – as you have shown.”

And as Red Eagle stood, one hand embracing his love, the other embraced by the eagle, he could do nothing but lift his head, heart and voice to the Great Spirit, and call a great cry of joy; exulting in his manhood and his Name.

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